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A STUDY OF ARNOLD-BENNETT

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CRITICISM

LA JEUNESSE DE SWINBURNE

SWINBURNE AND KEATS

ATALANTA IN CALYDON
(Preface to the Oxford University Press facsimile of the first edition)

SWINBURNE
A literary biography

THE NEW SWINBURNE

NOTES SUR LE ROMAN FRANCAIS CONTEMPORAIN

POETRY

EDEA ET AUTRES POEMES

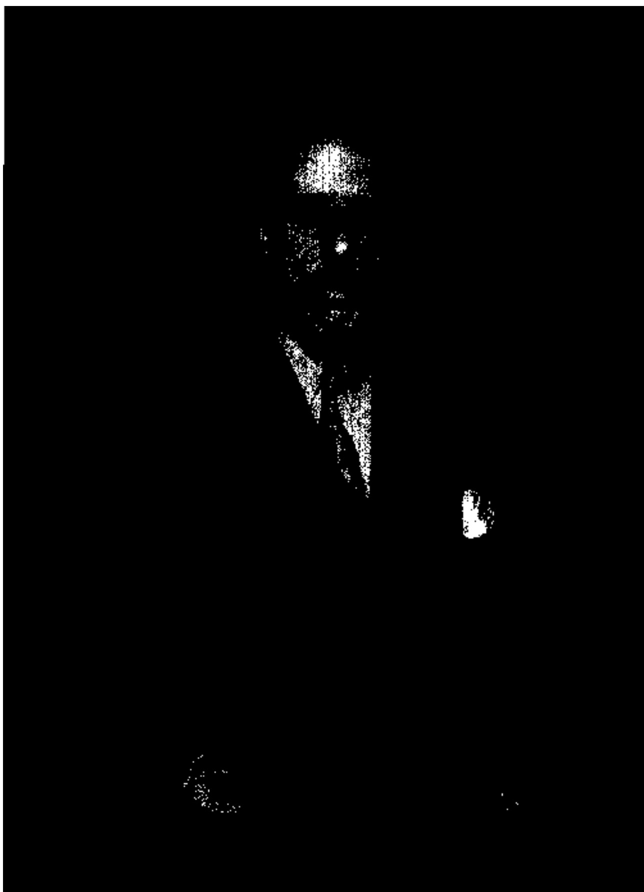
LES REFUGES
(Sonnets)

IXION

CADENCES

DRAMA

LE MARIAGE DE MILTON



Arnold Bennett

ARNOLD BENNETT

A STUDY

by

GEORGES LAFOURCADE

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TO

MR. R. A. SCOTT-JAMES

PREFATORY NOTE

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Most of the book was written when in 1938 I was invited for one semester by the Court of the University of Buffalo, to the T. J. Jones Chair of French and requested to give a course of lectures on Arnold Bennett in the Department of English. I derived, however, no uncertain benefit from the remarks and comments of Dean Julian Park and Professor Bonner, and from the learning of that keen Bennett Scholar, Professor F. A. Lappin, of d'Youville College, Buffalo.

Grenoble, February 1939.

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I

THE PROBLEMS OF ARNOLD BENNETT

WE have all seen him. In the flesh, in the picture papers or through the eyes of his friends and acquaintances: stiff body, heavy limbs despite the exquisite cut of his clothes, stiff neck, head thrown back like that of a pugilist, square chin and ugly teeth over the elaborate tie, harsh voice which stammered at important words with exaggerated emphasis, flat cheek bones, acute nose, brown tired half-closed eyes, powerful brow and over all the mayolesque crest of hair which gave the lie to the conflicting expressions of self-assertion and self-consciousness ever at war on that puzzling countenance; but, stronger than anything else, stronger even than the pride of his own affluence, cast over every feature and every tint, a web of weariness, the weight of all the fatigue of the world, as if he were the grumbling, over-worked drudge of his own prosperous factory. Such he appeared, at once dogmatic, diffident, shy, tyrannical, successful, sad and very tired. Disconcerting, and yet, it seems, despite his efforts and repressions, easy to read, easy to know—simple.

Some writers give the illusion of simplicity (Racine, Pope, Voltaire), others the illusion of complexity (Shakespeare, Proust, Lawrence). As often as not, it is a mere illusion, but Arnold Bennett belongs to the first class.

His career is simple: he was comparatively unknown and a bachelor until at the age of forty he married, wrote *The Old Wives⁹ Tale* and became famous. His work is no less simple: apart perhaps from some early effusions, and novels admittedly written to order, his books exhibit a remarkable unity of purpose. Whether he created or criticized, took the pen of the novelist, dramatist, critic, journalist, diarist or even perhaps letter-writer, there was in his manner something deliberate and matter-of-fact, an "objectivity", a singular absence of contradiction which excludes doubt and imprecision. In art, he was a realist. In religion, he was an agnostic. In politics, he was a socialist. In life, he was a successful man. Literature was to him a profession, and his materialistic conceptions on the subject are well known. "I am the djinn that performs tricks with some emotions, a pen and paper."[1] "I have never once produced any literary work without a preliminary incentive quite other than the incentive of ebullient imagination. I have never ' wanted to write' until the extrinsic advantages of writing presented themselves to me."[2] "An author is the same thing as a Grocer or a Duke,"[8] etc., etc. On the purely mechanical side of literature he was never tired of insisting. If ever anyone, as La Bruyere has it, made a book "as a clock is made", he was that man. A robot, a human machine. A highly complex and slowly perfected machine of course. But a machine can be taken to pieces.

Was he, however, that machine and nothing else? Geoffrey West who took Bennett at his face-value and

[1] *The Truth about an Author.*
[2] Ib.
[3] lb.

accepted the facts more or less as they have just been stated, called'his short study *The Problem of Arnold Bennett.* Even to him there was a problem—and this was it: why is Bennett known as the author of *The Old Wives[9] Tale?* He was forty when he published that book. He was sixty-three when he died. How is it that he wrote nothing better or as good before or after? The answer is, that he was a long time learning his .craft, and that, once he had secured fame by a masterpiece, he allowed himself to be (artistically) ruined by his thirst for money and his interest in the smaller details of material life. He thus "sacrificed his artistic integrity" to "journalistic ability".

Such a presentment of the case, however, raises more questions than it solves, and the correct title for Mr. West's volume should have been *The Problems of Arnold Bennett.* There are here indeed at least three important issues which should not be confused. In the first instance, is *The Old Wives[9] Tale* actually a wondrous feat which was never repeated? It had at any rate been clearly anticipated in three novels: *Anna, Leonora* and especially *Whom God Hath Joined,* in which style, psychology and local atmosphere are not infrequently equal to the best pages of the "masterpiece". It is true that they are not attempted in the same epic proportions. What saves *The Old Wives Tale* from being an amorphous mass of details loosely connected by the threads of three or four widely different narratives is precisely this rigid "unity of time" which is preserved with unflinching rectitude through the surge of so many conflicting interests and events. The style of the first chapters may not be quite in keeping with that of the rest of the story; the psychology of the characters, the realism of the descriptions may

occasionally prove superficial or highly conventional; but, the "time" is genuine and every event or bit of dialogue, however unreal, is firmly embedded into that uniform temporal texture which gives life and verisimilitude to all that it touches. But *Clayhanger* and *Riceyman Steps* have as good a claim to perfection. In fact the former is probably the most perfect of Bennett's novels, the latter the most artistic. As far as style, psychology and interest are concerned, they are superior to *The Old Wives Tale,* whose realism is easily outstripped by *The Pretty Lady* or *Lord Raingo,* while its epic proportions are almost equalled by *Imperial Palace.* It is a masterpiece, but the first masterpiece of its author, and shows immaturity, or at least timidity as well as power. The view.that this novel constitutes a solitary achievement is highly debatable. It suits manuals of literature and journalists in a hurry. It ignores the fact that, in his least auspicious novels, in his most mercantile moments, Arnold Bennett is apt to write admirably (some of his best prose can be culled from stray pages of his journalistic "inquiries" or "pocket philosophies"). It presupposes that the relative value of Arnold Bennett's one hundred and thirty-five novels or short stories has been settled once and for all. A clear case of begging the question.

A far more difficult problem, however, is confronting us,—an essential one, though any answer to it must needs be purely a matter of speculation. The value of the novels with reference to each other *will* sooner or later be settled; a large measure of agreement might even now be reached on the main issues. But what about the value of the novels with reference to Bennett himself? To put it more clearly, was not Arnold Bennett greater than his works? That is, of

course, than his best works? This view is more or less implied by Mr. West's position: the author of *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* ought to have produced a number of similar, or perhaps greater masterpieces, and he did not. The fault in some measure must have been his. What he produced was not his best. *He was greater than his work* J. B. Priestley (who, however, was writing in 1924, let it be remembered) certainly entertains the same opinion. He holds[1] that "in none of his works has the complete Mr. Bennett appeared", only separate sides of his genius. What the critic wanted, and at that time still expected, from the novelist was a higher synthesis in which the qualities of *Clayhanger* and *The Card* would be united and reconciled—presumably unflinching realism and boisterous humour. Bennett certainly never achieved such a combination and it may be doubted whether it was possible or desirable; whether J. B. Priestley was not led by his own picaresque, Dickensian conception of the novel to expect from another man the kind of work which was thoroughly alien to his nature. But in a penetrating article published recently in the *Revue Anglo-Americaine*[2] we find M. Tillier speaking of Arnold Bennett's "voluntary mutilation" and venting in no uncertain terms the sense of disappointment left in him by the novels. Those three critics then agree in feeling that the art of Bennett is somehow incomplete and in regretting alleged wasted opportunities. They not unnaturally sigh for unborn masterpieces. The man to them was greater than the work.

Is then what he *did* do so negligible? Is it not, considering

[1]***figures in Modern English Literature:*** **Arnold Bennett.**
[2]**January 1934.**

whence he started and how belated was his development, something wonderful, unhoped for? The question is -well worth asking. Little or no literary education to begin with, no strong urge to write, no great originality either in thought, feeling or taste, only some marked dislikes and great journalistic ability. No strong faith in himself either as it seems.[1] These are not exactly the makings of a great novelist. I can conceive quite well an Arnold Bennett who would have written *A Man from the North,* the sensational and sentimental stories, *The Card,* perhaps *Buried Alive,* and perhaps, in an inspired moment, *Leonora* and *Whom God Hath Joined—but* nothing else. But that the author of *Sacred and Profane Love,* of *The Glimpse* should also have written *Clayhanger* and *The Death of Simon Fuge* is certainly surprising. What we know of the deliberate way in which at the age of forty he sat down to write what, he had made up his mind, would be his *magnum opus,* confirms one in the impression that with remarkable energy and critical sense he took himself in hand and by sheer force of will power lifted himself to a higher plane of art. This is true at least of *The Old Wives Tale.* The qualities which are here revealed and which in the long run impressed the literary world were not splendour and variety of style or imagination; but care, patience, a minute accumulation and elaboration of details creating at long length the illusion of the remorseless passage of time. Here was genius, if ever genius was "an infinite capacity for taking pains". But there was precious

[1] "It is incontestable that at the end of the century I shall be dead" *(Books and Persons,* p. 49). "I have no inward assurance that I could ever do anything more than mediocre, viewed strictly as art—-very mediocre" *(Catalogue,* p. 23). "My work will never be better than third rate, judged by the high standards" *(Catalogue,* p. 25).

little else of what we usually associate with genius. Had Bennett lacked the patience, the will, the clear realization of his own limitations and strong points, he would have remained a minor, though still interesting figure, in the history of fiction. Surely his genius, if genius it is, was slowly and laboriously manufactured. It was chiefly a matter of selection, rejection and organization. The style of lis novels, their construction, their psychology all show the traces of gradual elaboration and patient development. There is.in them littie that is spontaneon, immediate. All this does not detract from the excellence of the work, or from the merit of the man. On the contrary. But the work, if this point of view is adopted, appears then greater than the nan. Bennett has often been compared to an industrious bricklayer, adding brick to brick with indefatigable care and unfailing attention. "Pour qui ce macon batit-ih" might well exclaim M. Chevalley. There are several answers to :he question, but of the solidity, soundness and symmetry *j>£* his construction, there can be no doubt. From imperfect Tfcaterials a manner of perfection has been achieved:

. So much for the artistic problem. It has also a commercial or historical side. Bennett may be the author of *The Old Wives' Tale,* as Daudet is the author of *Tartarin* or Swinburne *of Atalanta, not neccssarily because it is his best work* but the work through which be became famous. On this, the question of Bennett's success as an illustration of the morality of literature, A. R. Marble[1] has an interesting sermon to preach; he points out that the early novels, most of which were shamefaced efforts at money-making, had

[1]A. R. Marble. *A Study of the Modem Novel, British* **and** *American since* 1900. Applcton, 1928.

but a limited circulation, while *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale,* a sincere and disinterested piece of work, secured not only success for itself but also indirectly for the monsters that preceded. *The Gates of Wrath* (1903), *The Loot of Cities* (1904) and other and worse abominations, whose only excuse would have been a large sale, were not reprinted till 1912 or later. In 1907 Bennett wrote 375,000 words and made about £1200. By the end of 1912 he was getting £16,000 for about 160,000 words.[1] What a magnificent proof of the soundness of popular taste and the power of real art! The public after all is not such a contemptible fool as authors and publishers think, and the best way to make money is to write masterpieces!

But is it? Between 1908 and 1911 Bennett had not only published *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale.* He had also put on the market *Buried Alive* and the critical articles of Jacob Tonson. The success of *Buried Alive* seems to have been great. As for the articles of Jacob Tonson (Bennett took great care to let critics and publishers know that Jacob was Arnold), they impressed the literary world. Thus, partly by chance, partly no doubt by a deliberate calculation on his part, Arnold Bennett was revealed at once as a popular writer of comic fiction, as a great realist, as a clever and dangerous critic. The crust of public indifference which had so long proved adamant could no longer withstand the simultaneous application of those three powerful drills. And thus, with a bang, Arnold Bennett, in the full force of the French idiom, "perca". He pierced through comparative obscurity and neglect. A trip to the United States in 1911 during which he captured the American market further improved

[1]*Journals* I, p. 273; *II,* p. 56.

is position. He was known to everybody: those who had ot read *The Old Wives' Tale* or heard of Jacob Tonson id at least relished *Buried Alive.* Those who had appre- ated *The Old Wives' Tale* could no longer ignore the ithor of *Buried Alive.* The few who equally disapproved of oth remembered that the author was Jacob Tonson of the *Tew Age* and that it might be just as well to give him his ue. In that sense, and in that sense only, did *The Old Vives' Tale* contribute to the success of Arnold Bennett.

This commercial success, which was maintained in later ears, is, however, relative. One would require to be ossessed not only of the exact figures of the sales of ennett's novels, but also of those of his contemporaries, to ake an authoritative statement. But one may note that ese considerable sums of money which he proudly men- ons throughout his *Journals,* were hard to earn. He ldom wrote less than 300,000 words a year, often more— he equivalent of four considerable volumes. Even so it quired great skill and business capacity, not to mention cerary ability, to make as much money as he did. But—and is is the point at issue—these sums of money do not really hply an enormous sale for each of his volumes. Nor is this be wondered at if we think of the high literary standard most of his novels. It is certain that Hall Caine and Marie orelli (to name two of his pet aversions) had much bigger les, and deserved much better than he did the name of popular" novelists. Thus even the extent of Bennett's ommercial success remains an open question.

Yet he professed to have always this commercial success view. We here touch the human side of the problem, Ve have already seen with what childish cynicism he liked

to advertise this alleged mercantile trait of his nature. A early as 1900 he boastfully owned the soft impeachment, I 1920 he hinted that he was "tragically addicted to money making".[1] By 1928 he was somewhat blatant about i[1] "I write for money. I write for as much money as I ca get".[2] And he would even proselytize in the same vein "The first duty of a poet is not to write poetry but to kee himself in decency, and his wife and children, if he has their to discharge his current obligations, and to provide for ol age".[8] And he poured contempt on Baudelaire because b was always short of a five franc piece![4] Small wonde then if people took him at his word. Some critics, as w know, grew quite virtuous about it. He was accused[6] c having sold his gifts for money. After *The Old Wives' Ta* and the fame it brought him, he wrote "des essais back d'effront^s feuilletons" exclaims Abel Chevalley[6] wb later becomes comically indignant at *What the Public Wan* in the belief that it is a sentimental novel with a cynic title, instead of a grim satirical skit on the yellow press. "Ju for a handful of silver he left us_"

Let us for a moment suppose that he did pander to tl taste of the multitude. Mr. Desmond MacCarthy has show us that great artists have often taken that line. "It is amor the Purveyors, among writers who have regarded then selves, not as prophets revealing truth, nor as beinf

things that have Interested Me, II, p. 72: *Mr. Charles Garvice and the Highbrows.*

[2]*The Savour of Life—Explanation.*

[3]lb., p. 196.

[4]*Paris Nights: Italy* (1910) *I.*

[5]G. West. *The Problem of Arnold Bennett.*

[6]*Le roman anglais de notre temps.*

edicated to producing something perfect, but as men lpplying a need of the moment, that some of the greatest ames of all are found: Shakespeare, Moliere, Balzac, Oickens". Arnold Bennett would readily have counter-ghed such a statement. He never thought himself less of an rtist because he wrote for money. It is a gratuitous state-lent that he "sacrificed his artistic integrity". He was 'ways careful to point out that he did nothing of the kind. I write for money . . . Shakespeare and Balzac did the rme".[1] Most writers, he further argued "want you to ead them. Which means that they want you to buy their ooks. Which means that they have something to sell. Which means that they are merchants. Why then boggle the mercantile aspects of an artistic career?".[2]

In what is perhaps the most remarkable of all his books in literature, *The Author's Craft,*[3] he quotes Valery Lar-aud's epigram ("La femme est une grande r£alit6 comme la uerre") and applies it to that fickle jade, the public. "All eally original artists, he proceeds, are at loggerheads with he public—as an almost inevitable consequence of their riginality. Hence the necessity of compromise. For xample, the sagacious artist respects basic national pre-idices. No first class English novelist would allow his pen ontinental freedom in treating sexual problems" (this was written in 1914). "You can only go a very little further han is quite safe". And he sums up his doctrine in a striking rmula: "The artist puts into the trappings of the time as much of his eternal self as they will safely hold".

[1]*Savour of Life,* p. 10.
[2]lb., p. 196.
pp. 108-115.

Well and good; but if there has been a compromise what becomes of the "artistic integrity" which Bennett accused of having sacrificed? What was permissible befor *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* was unforgivable when that book has demonstrated the possibility of further masterpieces. This if I am not mistaken, is the position of most critics, c Geoffrey West in particular. It might be argued that it is precisely by this compromise that the greatest artisti integrity is ensured. Bennett would probably have take that line of argument, for in the course of the book ju quoted he clearly implies that "contact with the public essential" and that "the artist can always bend to it". An he might have pointed out that out of the tragedy of reveng Shakespeare made *Hamlet,* and out of the comedie-ballc Moli&re created *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.* But true (o- false) as this view might be with reference to those tw dramatists, or to Balzac and Dickens, I do not think that th argument can be applied to Bennett. He was less of a Pui veyor and more of a Priest than he was prepared to admis There were things about which he would never com promise. For instance he "would not bow in the House c Rimmon of sentimentality".[1] And yet, in *Fame an Fiction,*[2] Bennett had studied the secrets of the popularity c the chief "best sellers" of the age, and he could not bu know that sentiment was the shortest cut to a large circula tion. Molifere in his happy endings and Shakespeai practically everywhere bowed profusely to the idol, an thought nothing of it. Again in the *Explanation** from which

[1]*The Truth about an Author,* VII.
[2]1901.
[3]To *The Savour of Life.*

tation has already been made, he admits that "I never te *on* a subject which does not interest me and I always te as well as heaven permits". That this is on the whole rue statement is o n e Benntt's chief titles to a high ce, in literature; but it would no longer be true had kespeare, Molifere, Balzac or Dickens written it instead im. These have all been "guilty of hasty writing".

The Arch-Purveyor is then no purveyor at all; or at least cannot be classed with the great purveyors of the world. conquering and preserving a large circulation without ng up his honest realism, his honest Style, his honest kmanship Bennett achieved *a tour deforce:* he was that phenomenon, a cross between the Priest and the veyor. And yet (so complicated this "simple" writer sometimes seem) I wonder whether the artistic faculty not always with him supreme, whether his mercantile look, his readiness to sacrifice what the public might not or approve of were not often in subtle accordance with inner literary conscience. What he rejected for reasons of ortunity, perhaps the artist in him would not have erated, though he disliked to own to such timidity of e. Hence the comparative moderation of his realism, t exquisite balance which saved him from the worst esses of the French and English realists.

ll this is highly debatable, but will certainly bear dision. It tends to show the very real complexity which is :ealed below the apparent simplicity of the man and his . Indeed the game of detecting acute contradictions in works and personality of Arnold Bennett might be ied still further. With the help of relevant quotations m the best critics it might be shown that he has been

praised or criticized for qualities and faults which mutually exclusive. One likes the form of his novels, another the matter. One denounces his want of anytln definite to say, another proclaims his style execrable. *M.* agree about praising his "technique" but what they mean "technique" is not always clear. There is also a consen that, whatever his faults, he was great. But what was • nature of his greatness? Some see him as a romantic wear a mask; others as a detached realist. Was he not above classical, a highly rational and selective artist? Is his great closely "connected with the Five Towns" or is the regio ism of his novels superficial and accidental? Was the ma heart a provincial, or was he not essentially cosmopoI and metropolitan? Was he, as he so often insisted, pre and business-like or was he, as he also claimed, natur, indolent and incapable of research-work?

It is remarkable that all these contradictory questions,; more, might be asked without any of them appear forced, and that none could be answered with a compI denial. However, in spite of these very real objections, general impression of simplicity remains. On the intellect, plane we are before Arnold Bennett like Stendhal's lo before the mental image of his mistress. We see him, t is to say we read and understand his works, and his ima crystallizes as that of a clear, precise and faultless gen' But we fall to studying and scrutinizing individual feat' of the image; we compare, we analyse, we are pertur[1] confused; the neat pattern is blurred and disapp Stendhal, however, warns us that after such periods laborious introspection a second image generally emerg if anything clearer, brighter and more stable than the fir

ndhaI's lover is obviously a critic, though it is equally e that a critic must also be a lover. We should be pared for many stages of hesitation and uncertainty ore we can hope to attain the final crystallization.

*

II

A MAN FROM THE NORTH

ARNOLD BENNETT took care, posthumously - during his lifetime, to provide students of his w with ample biographical materials. At this the critic be pleased—or resentful. A decent author should help biographer, but not render him useless, by supplying many facts and in too coherent a form. It was *ma* centuries before a Life of Evelyn was attempted. It may just as bad manners for a famous man to say too much a say too little.

It would seem at first that Bennett said too much. Ap from the posthumous *Journals* which (unexpurgated) wo probably run into nine or ten volumes, he himself publis) some half-dozen books of impressions or autobiograp *The Truth about an Author* (first published serially in 18 deals with the beginnings of his career, a period w! might otherwise have remained obscure. But it has peculiarity of having been published anonymously. Ben tries to interest his readers in himself, not because he is successful Arnold Bennett that he was not yet, but ber his life should in itself have some interest. He is tempted in order to hold the reader's attention to heig the colours. Some of the anecdotes—such as the Auti first contact with literature, the successful prize-ess;

school, "Gwendolen's" column in the ladies' paper—are so good and to the point that one fears they may have been improved. Moreover the book is written with a kind of swagger. In that anonymous volume of 1903 Bennett is already striking an attitude which will always remain his. He poses as the young provincial who rises to a high position in the London literary world not through hard work or irrepressible genius, but by mere cleverness, self-confidence and audacity. The book too is distinctly didactic. It is one of the first, if not the first, of those practical guides which Bennett will later lavish on a world of readers impressed by his fame. But here he relies on the magic of the fact alone. The mountebank (I use the word in its proper sense without unfavourable implications) says in short "Behold how I got on. It is easy for you to do the same". This is quite obvious in the passage beginning "See the editor in his suburban residence, etc."[1] He writes with a view to impress people and delights in the impression he is likely to make. Of course the narrative is *not false*. In a sense we do get the truth about the author, because he always improves and touches up the facts with an eye to the ideal which he sincerely desires to achieve. But in that sense only do we get the truth.

We should therefore use the book with caution, without denying its value as a biographical and human document. The *Journals* are far more reliable, since they provide precise dates as well as facts. They are not strictly posthumous seeing that as early as 1906 Bennett had printed privately (in what intention is not to me quite clear) a few pages from them referring to the years 1896-1899. The *Journal* for 1929 was published during his lifetime and there

[1] XV.

is no doubt that for many of his articles and novels he drew from this great store of facts and impressions.[1] It is hard to form an opinion of these *Journals* as a whole seeing that we were only given a fraction of them—how great or how small a fraction is not certain.[2] It is well to bear in mind the case of the Goncourts. Bennett's *Journal* was no doubt started in emulation of theirs and for the same artistic reasons: at the beginning at least they were meant as realistic note-books, the famous "carnets" of the naturalistic school, which would later help the novelist in displaying "slices" of life. Edmond's description of the death of Jules maybe paralleled in the equally remarkable passage describing "the death of the Mater". But from the first Bennett's *Journal* is more impersonal, more detached than that of the Goncourts. In that sense, and as far as the *Journals* are concerned, it is the English writer who is the more perfect realist. During the first years he occasionally indulges in some expressions of personal feeling. He introduces the description of a picturesque couple seen in a bus in 1895 with a general remark: "How rarely does one find people unaffectedly content with themselves and their social status". And he concludes with a personal judgment "I very nearly said to the conductor: 'Isn't that pretty'." The psychological revelation may not be considerable but it would be difficult to find even such a brief subjective touch in the later pages. It seems that it was chiefly in the autumn of 1907, under the influence of Stendhal, whose unpublished *Journal* he had

[1]See many of the articles collected in the three series of *Things that have Interested* Me.

[2]To realize the extent and nature of the editorial "Cuts" compare the extracts from the *Journals* for the year 1907 published in the January 1929 issue of *Life and Letters* with the text of the posthumous volumes.

been reading in the *Mercure de France,* that Bennett decided to alter the style of his daily entries. He found that in comparison he was "wasting a great deal of time in the proper construction of sentences". And he added: "Quite unnecessary to do this in recording impressions".[1] This is an important turning point, and it should be duly recorded as well as the Stendhalian influence which it implies. Henceforth Bennett's notations of facts and ideas are mostly expressed in a dry telegraphic style with verbs generally omitted. This further tended to make the style more impersonal, more similar to that of the "Napoleonic code" which Stendhal set up as a model. We have in most of these pages but the hard dessicated facts and sensations to be later diluted and mellowed if need arose.[2]

What was Bennett's own conception of a *Journal?* Let us turn for an answer to one of those terrible "pocket philosophies" in which some ore is allied to much dross. "Diaries are apt to get themselves done with the very minimum of mental effort, they also touch to an exaggeration of egotism. A journal is better. . . . A diary treats exclusively of one's self and one's doings; a journal roams wider and notes whatever one has observed of interest. A diary is "all I, I, I, I, itself I" . A journal is the large spectacle of life."[3]

[1]*Journals,* I, p. 263.

[2]Such seems at least to be the case, though the editor frankly acknowledges that he eliminated "many outspoken comments and statements about people well known and otherwise and certain affairs which could not be left in with prudence". These comments and statements were of course highly personal. See for instance Vol. I, p. 10, a description of a meeting with John Buchan in which what was probably an "outspoken" phrase seems to have been omitted. Bennett appears the less human.

[3]Mental Efficiency *(Mental Callisthenics),* 1911.

Although Bennett may not always have abided by his own definition in keeping his *Journal,* it is none the less 'interesting as showing what was at least the ideal conception.

With all necessary explanations and extenuations the fact remains that those *Journals,* though they are a valuable record of facts for the historians as well as for the biographer, contain no deep psychological revelation—except precisely a tendency to suppress systematically personal reactions. A comparison with almost any page from Saint-Simon or Pepys is enough to bring this truth home. Queerly enough it is in his most intimate papers, letters and diaries, which were not intended for immediate publication that Bennett appears most cautious and reserved. In some of his collections of essays, critical articles, or impressions of travel on the contrary the spontaneous reactions of the man and some of the most generous features of his nature appear far more freely. One may gather much interesting material in the three volumes of *Things that have Interested Me,* for instance: "The Desire for France", "Unknown Southern France" and "My Greatest Moment" are pages of delightfully human autobiography. Even such slight sketches as "The Barber", "Railway Accident at Mantes", "Rops" and in a more bitter vein "The Passing of the Puritans" are intensely revealing. *The Savour of Life* also leaves us with a fairly clear impression of Bennett's personality, though it is the Bennett of the later years, with some heaviness of touch and an unpleasant tendency to take himself seriously as the Apostle of middle-class common sense. But just as Stendhal is perhaps seen at his best in *Les Mimoires d'un Touriste,* it is in the little known pages of two books which merely record impressions of travel that Bennett comes out

most vividly and to his full advantage: *Paris Nights,* and *The Log of the Velsa* in which while recording the experiences of his first yachting cruises he occasionally and perhaps unconsciously bares his soul to us in an unexpected manner.[1]

This preliminary survey of biographical data has shown perhaps that in spite of the wealth of material, and possibly on account of this very wealth, of the complexity and number of the facts involved, a critical summary of the chief events in Bennetts life is worth attempting. Anything beyond a brief enumeration followed by an effort at establishing some kind of perspective would be out of place in this book and perhaps at this date. A full-dress biography would incur the double risk of being sadly incomplete on some vital points and of repeating much unnecessary detail which is easily accessible elsewhere.

He was born in 1867 the eldest of six children (three boys and three girls) at Shelton, N.E. Hanley. On his mother's father's side (the Langsons) he was descended from farmers who came originally from the borders of Wales (Marple). His other ancestors on the maternal side (the Claytons) as well as on the side of his father (the Vernons and the Bennetts) seem to have been weavers and potters residing in the Five Town district.[2] Bennett was not slow in pointing

[1] The Selection of Letters, published by Mrs. Dorothy Cheston Bennett in 1935, contains a few important documents; especially those dated 26 June, 20 August, 1923, 5 April, 21 June, 1924, 28 August, 1925, 2 May, 1927. There is, however, little of permanent interest which does not already appear in *the Journals.*

The Letters, published by his nephew in 1936, are singularly dry and uninforming.

[2] Sec *Journals,* I, p. 111.

out that though he had none of their manual dexterity he was possessed of their mercantile instincts. Those mercantile instincts though probable are a supposition.[1] On the contrary it is fitting that this great literary craftsman should be descended from a long line of manual craftsmen* the patience and the loving care which he lavished over the construction of a plot or the polishing of a sentence was perhaps inherited. Most terms describing the weavers or the potters' trade may be applied to the art of Arnold Bennett.

Farmers or working men, his ancestors were all Puritans. Bennett was brought up as a Wesleyan Methodist and his intense, almost fanatical dislike for this form of religion found continuous utterance in his work. *Anna of the Five Towns* contains excellent descriptions of a revivalist meeting —excellent but bitterly satirical. Bennett's own grievance at having to attend chapel three times on Sunday as well as religious instruction on Saturday afternoon is fully displayed in the autobiographical first chapters of *Clayhanger.* As late as 1926 in an article entitled "The Passing of the Puritans" he performed a sort of death dance on the alleged extinction of Puritanism. Of it he might have said what he said of the Victorian age with which he certainly identified it: "It acutely exasperated me while 1 was young. ... It had the terrible vices of continual repression and disgusting hypocrisy . . . and to contemplate its corpse gives me genuine pleasure".

[1]The commercial atmosphere should not, however, be underrated. Arnold Bennett lived for some time with one of his sisters in the draper's shop of his maternal grandparents. This shop is described in *The Old Wives Tale.*

He was however always more concerned with the social and human consequences of Puritanism than with its dogma. His aversion to metaphysics prevented him from getting at the core of the problem, and in his eyes the chief charge against Puritanism was that it was not living up to its own rigid principles. There *is* 1 believe little doubt that this was partly due to the personality of his own father. Whoever has read *Clayhanger* is aware that there can have been little sympathy between Bennett and him. He was a lawyer, a man of ability with a taste for books. His conception of paternal authority however early caused a clash which was never quite forgotten. Darius Clayhanger has much in common with his character, and it should be noted that Darius is not without his good points. Bennett recognized that he "owed a great deal to his father" in whose office he worked for a time and who initiated him to business methods. But the son deeply and lastingly resented his insistence on the strict performance of religious duties by all members of the family while he himself carefully refrained from going to chapel, and "lay in bed reading magazines". He thus made his father jointly responsible for "Chapel and Sunday school and the desolation of sabbaths".[1] And he was shocked by the lack of consistency implied by such an attitude. He looked round and noticed that among the elder members of the Community two vices were quite compatible with Puritanical professions—avarice and gluttony. He lost all faith and respect for his creed. To the last, Puritanism was connected in his mind with avarice, hypocrisy and parental tyranny.

It was also no doubt connected with the local setting.

[1] ***Things that have Interested Me,*** **HI, p. 257.**

Bennett's attitude to the Five Towns will be later analysed. But it should at once be stated that his vision of life in Burslem is tinged with Puritanism. It was the Puritanical ban on all forms of enjoyment on Sundays which greatly contributed to that "fantastic ennui" that "huge boredom" of the provinces which he never tired of denouncing. The artist in him rebelled against the ugliness of the surroundings. "1 do not think the Five Towns will ever be described: Dante lived too soon."[1] This is fairly definite. Although he seldom indulged, except in his early books, in physical descriptions of the industrial country, it is obvious that he suffered from this lack of beauty and romance. "You might walk from one end of the Five Towns to the other and not see one object that gave a thrill."[2] A detached observer, J. B. Priestley, corroborates this impression: "It is extremely ugly. . . . The general impression is of an exceptionally mean, dingy provinciality, of Victorian industrialism in its dirtiest and most cynical aspects".[3]

Against this atmosphere of ugliness and "mediocre respectability" which weighed on his heart he had little or no shelter. His feelings for his mother were warm and devoted; when he left home, he kept up a daily correspondence with her, though probably more from a sense of duty than because these letters afforded an outlet for his subjective emotions as Mrs. Cheston Bennett argues.[4] His reading was strangely limited. He tells us that he was

[1]*The Grim Smile of the Five Towns.*

[2]*These Twain.*

[3]*English Journey.*

[4]These letters seem to have been destroyed. Arnold Bennett used to imagine facts and events to fill up those daily pages of correspondence. See *What the Public Wants,* Act I.

brought up by his father on Lowell's *My Study Windows* and on Green's *History,* two books which he hated. He had to take refuge in Ouida, who probably influenced his sensibiHty in no slight degree, in *The GirVsOwn Paper* which he devoured and in water-colour painting. In spite of a story of his winning a prize-essay, it seems that the years which he spent at the Endowed Middle School of New-castle-under-Lyme were practically barren of any lasting literary consequences—except a cordial dislike of Shake-speare and Longfellow.

As far as his intellectual development is concerned he derived no help from his schoolmasters. He himself took great care to warn us that "he never set foot even in the towns of Oxford and Cambridge" and that "destiny had deprived him of the advantages and peril of a University education".[1] Even without this confession and without external confirmation it would have been easy to gather as much about one who speaks of "Virgil who by the way describes a Christmas tree",[2] who casually states that "he has no admiration for Horace", who describes the perform-ance of Greek plays at Cambridge as "a blague and a mystification", and entertains the conviction "that Plato is a damned unequal author". If we can trust *The Truth about an Author* he had by 1888 read almost nothing of Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, George Eliot, Boswell, Wordsworth. There is some swagger and inverted pose in such a statement. But it may have been true on the whole. Bennett suffered and benefited by it. Of course he was left a helpless prey to the influence

[1]*Those United States,* p. 150.
[2]*Friendship and Happiness,* p. 26.

of Ouida and *The Girl's Own Papers.* But when he began to write he was not beset by artificial associations and' classical reminiscences. His style is practically free from Shakespearean and even biblical phrases. Which greatly strengthens his claims to be the first of English realists.

He now entered his father's office at Hanley and read as best he could for a law degree, having about 1886 matriculated at London University. Little else that has affected his literary development can be recorded, beyond his acquaintance with English translations of some of the novels of Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant, and an obscure connection with the *Staffordshire Sentinel,* obtained chiefly through the influence of his father who had some business interest in the paper. He showed precocious journalistic ability in dealing with a column of town gossip, and if we may trust the narrative of *The Truth about an Author*[1] "concocted" two serial novels, one showing the influence of Zola's *L'Assommoir* in the character of a drunken woman, which were refused by the local Press. Towards the end of 1888 Bennett left the Five Towns and became a clerk in a solicitor's office in London.

It will be seen that, contrary to what usually happens, most of the influences which affected Bennett in these early years (1867-1889) were of a negative character. The core of some of his greatest novels is an acute conflict between parents and children and, like Samuel Butler, he frankly sides with youth against the pretences of older people. Puritanism he violently rejected for moral and aesthetical reasons. Yet one should not here be too absolute; it would be strange if the strict mental discipline of Methodism had not left some

[1]**pp. 30-31.**

trace on one who was so early and intensely subjected to it. Bennett-himself admitted that "on one side Puritanism undoubtedly did help to form and stiffen the character, to give strength of mind and the ability to do without".[1] This should be further interpreted: the habit of continuous repression which is a strong feature of Bennett's heroes and was, as we are told on so many sides, an essential feature of the man, may, it seems, be traced to this puritanical upbringing in the close atmosphere of the family circle. No illustrations are required to anyone who has in mind the relevant scenes from *Clayhanger.* Bennett made his characters at least act one way and often think in an opposite one. And the artist, with true Dostoevskian subtlety, carefully sets down the contrast. Hence this impression of contradiction, which often amounts to hypocrisy, about Bennett's heroes. But theirs is the hypocrisy of the Puritan, not the Jesuit. They are with themselves at war, and the will (sometimes wrongly identified with the brain) conquers, though not without immense slaughter. Edwin is of course a puritan, but so is G. J. Hoape of *The Pretty Lady* (what a contrast with the Latin mind of Christine!), so is the incomparable Earlforward, so is Evelyn of *The Imperial Palace,* so perhaps is even Lord Raingo. They grapple with the sensuous or sensitive part of their nature with all the eager violence of the puritan. But the sensitive part wriggles and dies hard. Hence the struggle which is one half of the psychology of Bennett's novels. Similarly a subtle vein of mysticism runs through the iron heart of the Methodist's creed. As Bennett himself explains[2] it is necessary for non-

[1] *Things that have Interested Me, III,* p. 239.
[2] Ib., *II,* p. 252.

conformists to be "converted". "You had to be born again, you had suddenly to see a mystic light. . . . Church of Englanders condemned this experience as being allied to hysteria". Nor is this throbbing hysterical vein quite absent from Bennett's works. It is always present in the. background though curbed by the strong will of the stern realist. We are here at the roots of the essential impulses of Bennett's divided inspiration. Some have tried to explain this curious contrast, which gives his manner a flavour that is unique, by fortuitous circumstances.[1] The whole process can be traced back to much earlier and complex causes. It is an ingrained attitude of the mind derived from religious instruction in the family circle.

Much as he disliked life in the Five Towns, and provincialism in general, with its narrowness, meddlesomeness and ennui, he always preserved some of the features of the provincial. He knew the virtues of the country towns. It was as a *regionaliste* that he made his fame, and his satirical picture of local types and manners is not without flashes of genuine admiration and pride. Abel Chevalley found him "durement marque, tare presque par son origine locale". His hate of the provinces, his gusto for metropolitan and cosmopolitan life is in itself typical of the provincial let loose. When he came to London in 1888 we know that he was precisely in this state of mind. The first lines of *A Man from the North* describe exactly what he then felt. Paris and only to a lesser extent London, is a modern Babylon, a "city of Oriental romance"[2]—a centre of golden opportunities

[1]**A** broken engagement, an "objective" marriage. See Dorothy Cheston Bennett: *Arnold Bennett, A Study done at Home.*

[2]*Paris Nights,* **p. 7.**

and exquisite corruption. The white Barbarian from the North sees it indeed as "a city to loot". This feeling, in all its coarseness and naivete, is essentially provincial.

He found however that he must do much hard work and very little "looting" to begin with. This positive education which had been so utterly wanting in the Five Towns he had now to acquire for himself under considerable difficulties. During those years 1889-1900 Bennett is making up for lost time and serving a long but successful period of apprenticeship.

At first he was a clerk with regular office hours and a small salary. He proved efficient and held afterwards that this business training had been entirely to the good. But he had little leisure for art, and a six shillings a week room and vegetarian dinners were not exactly conducive to creative work. With remarkable industry however he proceeded to educate himself. He began by buying and collecting books, more books than he could read, with a neophyte's optimism and in the belief that living among well-filled shelves was in itself a sign of culture. Like Richard Larch, the hero of *A Man from the North* he bought Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique,* and a princeps editions of Plutarch! It only remained for him to learn Greek! But he drilled himself into reading in the original his beloved French realists. He started in 1890 by a painful struggle with Daudet's *Fromont Jeune et Risler Aine.* It was an important turning point. He was then able to read widely in the works of Maupassant, Huysmans, the Goncourts, Turguenev. Of course he revelled in George Moore. Yet he professed that he had

never finished any of Dickens's novels. This was certainly an uncommon training for a struggling London clerk of literary proclivities. And he might with some show of reason insist that his first novel, *A Man from the North,* whatever its faults, was something which had never yet been attempted in England.

He completed his artistic education by practising sedulously water-colour painting and music. He decided in 1891 to live in Chelsea and joined the household of his artist friend, Mr. F. Marriot.

He also carried on his experiments in creative literature. On this period of his career he has, in *The Truth about an Author,* written with comic bitterness. These were, he said, days of dishonour and failure. He did not refer so much to the inferior quality of what he wrote as to the fact that he was a "free-lance", in the to him humiliating position of having to beg acceptance for his proffered contributions from fastidious editors. The feelings of the young author as he hears in the letter box the thud of a parcel indicating that his manuscript has been rejected are humorously described in *A Man from the North.* There is however reason to think that Bennett resented such failures keenly. The novel already referred to was written a little later, in 1895-1897, but it embodies his feelings at that stage, and it is significant that Richard Larch is one of the few unsuccessful heroes, if not the only one, in Bennett's gallery of fiction. The young author was not, though, altogether unsuccessful: all his friends believed in his ultimate success. He won several prizes for short stories and essays. In 1893 his parody of a thriller by Grant Allen was published in *Tit Bits* and won a £21 prize. He tells us that a large number of his chronicles

and political skits appeared in various magazines. As was the case for Balzac, the bibliography of Bennett's productions at this period is difficult to establish. Many of his contributions have not yet been listed or identified. ' Some works have been wrongly attributed to him, as for instance the childish novels of Ellen A. Bennett *Stephen Ashtons Dragon* and *Sidney Yorke's Friend.* To whatever depths Bennett may have sunk in his sensational novels of these and the succeeding years, he never fell quite so low.

In 1893 he secured the post of assistant-editor of *Woman,* resigned his position as a clerk and escaped from the humiliations of the "free-lance". This was a decisive step forward in his literary career. But it was due neither to chance nor merit. As he himself explained, the post was obtained "through gross influence", and he hints elsewhere that "it was not unconnected with a purchase of debentures".[1] But once on the staff of this important paper he made admirable use of his opportunities.

The three years of his sub-editorship were indeed years of hard silent work and training. He "went through the mill". He wrote anonymously or under unexpected signatures (Gwendolene!) on practically everything, frocks, lingerie, bargains, food, cookery, children, hygiene and Paris "high life". The motto of the paper was "Forward but not too fast". It admirably suited the character of the young sub-editor. He has himself recounted his experiences at the time so often and so well that it is needless to describe them again. Let us however note that a short story of his, *A Letter Home,* written in 1893, was published in *The Yellow Book* in his

[1]***The Savour of Life,* p. 141.**

own name in 1895. The tale, we are told, shows traces of his French models with some concessions to the Wildesque atmosphere then prevailing. Neither influences are obvious, but it is interesting to find Bennett at this early stage introducing (quite unnecessarily) a character from the Five Towns.

With the unexpected retirement of the Editor came Bennett's big chance. He was appointed to the post, because he was efficient and there was nobody else. During the four years of his editorship (November 1896-May 1900) he made considerable and rapid progress. His responsibilities naturally increased and he felt that the office was "dogging him everywhere". But his opportunities improved accordingly. As a novelist, he got his first story (A *Man from the North)* accepted and published by John Lane on a favourable report from John Buchan. He sold several serials and finished one of his best early novels *Anna* with a fair prospect of publication. As a playwright he wrote several comedies alone or in collaboration with Eden Phillpotts. He opened the series of his famous "guide-books" with *Journalism for Women* which embodies the fruit of his painful experiences as Editor of a ladies' journal. He was dramatic critic and reviewer to the *Academy* and other papers. He became in 1899 Principal Reader for Pearsons. In the course of the year 1899 he wrote 330,000 words, published 224 articles and stories, made £592. By 1900 he could claim that he had composed nine important books. The last pages of *The Truth about an Author* give us a slightly idealized picture of the successful journalist at this stage. His social activities increased accordingly. He had now a large circle of friends: the Marriots, Dr. Farrar, E. M. Symons, Rickhard.

He visited Normandy and Belgium and in October **1897 he** spent a-month in Paris. It was then (September 1900) that Arnold Bennett resigned his editorship. The step is indeed surprising. It would be a further proof of his remarkable sagacity and understanding of his possibilities, if it were quite certain that he acted solely on the conviction that "all great men of letters lived away from London" and that he had sufficient confidence in his future to devote himself solely to pure literature. He consulted with his father who had retired from business and decided to live on a farm in Bedfordshire with his parents and his youngest sister. In *The Desire for France*[1] he hints that "a remarkable group of circumstances left him free from all local ties to earn his living where he chose". What these circumstances which required parental approval exactly were it is not possible to guess beyond the fact that they ensured a minimum of financial independence.

These eleven years in London had been for Bennett an unique initiation to the kind of career in which it was his ambition to excel. However the apprenticeship was long and laborious. With all his industry, good fortune and capacity to inspire confidence he had not, at the age of thirty-three, made any name to speak of in the literary world: publishers and journalists seem to have been convinced of his future before ever the public was.

A very important feature of this part of his career is the fact (after all purely accidental) that he edited a *woman s* paper. He wrote in 1897: "The constant unsleeping watchfulness for verbal mistakes and slips and clumsiness in composition, necessitated by my post as editor of women's

[1] ***Things that have Interested Me,* I, p. 193.**

journalism, has sharpened and exasperated my suscepti-bilities"[1]. This is further illustrated by turning to thfc pages of *Journalism for Women* in which he violently deprecates bad spelling and grammar, amateurism in style and excess of sentiment. These experiences (which sorely tried his patience) deeply affected Bennett's literary and human development. His style, his methods and even to a certain extent his psychology, will henceforth be a revulsion (and a very violent one) from the glaring defects he had so often witnessed in the work of women journalists. Bennett, with all his subtle understanding of woman's nature, though never a misogynist, will always strongly remain anti-feminist as an artist and to a certain extent as a man.

Thus the curtain falls on an idyllic scene of what might conceivably have been the last act in the life of Arnold Bennett. He has retired in the country to devote himself to his art. He wants leisure and the calm security of family life to produce his best work. He will naturally be able to develop that gift for local descriptions and provincial characterization which is a marked feature of his early work. In fact, he tells us that he has decided to "stick to Staffs stories". He has escaped the "unliterary" atmosphere of London, which the blatant nationalism aroused by the Boer war has made, to him as to his master George Moore, doubly undesirable. Meanwhile, so as to keep the pot boiling, he writes plays *(The Chancellor)* or articles *(Fame and Fiction)*. He succeeds in making an income of *£620* and can thus afford to devote some time to disinterested creative

[1] *Journals,* I, 67.

work *(Anna)* and also to a better acquaintance with the masters of fiction. He reads Balzac extensively, Dumas, Gaboriau. He even begins to study Latin.

But this is a mere transition, at best an interlude. When the curtain rises again in 1903 (the movements of Bennett during 1901 and 1902 are somewhat uncertain) we find the Bedfordshire farmer transformed into a Parisian artist and man of letters. It seems that the death of his father had given him complete independence. He decided to visit North Africa, probably in search of colour and atmosphere. Some of his impressions are related in the first short stories of *The Loot of Cities.* He did not however tarry long and gives us to understand that on his way back to England, he was so captivated by the charm of Paris that, yielding to a sudden impulse, he made up his mind to live there. There are however reasons to believe that his choice was less sudden and more deliberate than he would have us think.

By the middle of March 1903 he had a flat in Paris, first in the rue de Calais, then in the rue d'Aumale. Except for the fact that his work was done in English and for the English public, and that he occasionally paid short visits to England, he became during nine years to all intents and purposes a sort of Parisian society-journalist and acquired many of the ways and mental habits of a typical Frenchman. His friends were numerous, both among the English colony and in the French literary circles. To Mr. H. D. Davray, whom he knew through H. G. Wells, he owed invaluable introductions. He was soon on friendly terms with eminent writers like Marcel Schwob, musicians like Ravel, Ricardo Vignfcs (who is the Diaz of *Sacred and Profane Love),*

Calvocoressi, painters like Bonnard and Laprade and mere idlers like Emile Martin to whom he was indebted for much of his acquaintance with the intimate aspects of Parisian life. He dined out almost every night, continually enlarged the circle of his relations, and spent a fair amount of money in a mode of life which, to most, would have appeared brilliant and luxurious, and which in the Five Towns could not have been described otherwise than as reckless and dissolute.

But he was not idle. He never lost touch with London publishers and editors; and he kept his name carefully before the British public. There were imperative financial reasons for it. He relied chiefly, for his income, on short stories and on series of articles of a didactic nature in which he gravely undertook to supply the young with the experience which they lacked and to teach the unsuccessful how not to repeat the experience which they had. These "savoir-faire" and "savoir-vivre" articles appeared in *T.P.'s Weekly,* the *Sketch,* the *Sphere, Tillotsons Magazine,* the *Evening News,* etc., and were for the most part later collected in the "guide-books" and "pocket philosophies" to which brief reference will have to be made. They brought in a moderate but fairly regular amount of money. The financial prospects much improved when in 1904 his literary agent Pinker agreed to let him have £50 every month. Bennett also wrote novels continuously, some purely for money *(Teresa, The Gates of Wrath)* but many in a serious endeavour to conquer a solid notoriety *(Leonora, Sacred and Profane Love).* He was however wrong to rely as he did on the writing of plays to increase his fortunes and wasted in that line of work much useless activity. Out of the dozen

plays[1] which he wrote at the time in collaboration with various authors, hardly any were produced, though advance royalties were sometimes paid, and most remain unpublished to this day.

His income however rose or was maintained at a very sufficient figure being seldom inferior to £1,000, which was quite enough for his needs. Yet when we consider Bennett's literary work during that period (even without paying undue attention to the more exclusively mercenary part of it) we cannot but reach the conclusion that it is unsatisfactory. Out of the twenty odd novels which he composed between 1900 and 1907 there is not one masterpiece with the possible exception of *The Death of Simon Fuge* which, being short and ambiguous, might pass as some sort of miraculous accident, and *Whom God Hath Joined,* which is too imperfect to deserve the name.

And yet (which made it only more serious) Bennett was trying his hardest. *Anna* and *Leonora* are competent and honest pieces of work but would scarcely be remembered nowadays. *A Great Man* which he accounted "a literary success though a commercial failure" cannot be taken seriously. *Sacred and Profane Love,* in which he most believed, is a complete and dismal failure. Bennett felt it obscurely. He identified himself with one of his own heroes—Henry Shakespeare Knight—and knew in his heart that he was not really a "great man" and that the Tom Knights of the earth would always eclipse him. He was merely a pseudo-successful man, enjoying but an attenuated

[1] *The Postmistress, The Chancellor, Children of the Mist, A Credit to Human Nature, Christina, An Angel Unawares, Que Faire?, The Sole Survivor,* etc.

shadow of real fame and wealth. In May 1904 he exclaimed: "To-day I am thirty-seven. I have lived longer than I shall live. My new serial begins to appear to-day in the *Windsor.* My name is not on the cover. . . . And I am thirty-seven. Comment is needless." And a little later he complained that "his trade as author was a dog's existence", ill-paid, insecure, and gave as "an incontestable fact" that "by the end of the century he would be dead".

For he was in the full maturity of his powers and the circumstances had never been more favourable. During the past few years he had read extensively, and carefully supplemented his literary education. By 1903 he could claim that he knew all the first class French novels of the nineteenth century, in addition to which he had studied Smollett, Laclos, Stendhal, Casanova, Butler, Taine and Dostoevsky.[1] Moreover he was living in Paris, enjoying the company of men of letters and a milieu which he had deliberately chosen as best suited for his work. Escape from the old limitations, and a new stimulus, "liberation and atmosphere", these were the things which he had hoped to find in Paris ("Paris the self-unconscious") and he had not been disappointed. "This is as near regular happiness as I am ever likely to get".[2] He was happy, not only because of the sensual gratifications which he indulged, but happy as an artist in a country where expression is supposed to be freer and easier than in other lands. He expressed himself in the Empire furniture of his flats. He expressed himself, in spite of the double difficulty of language and an impcdi-

youmab, I, p. 149. His first reference to Dostoevsky occurs in January 1904.

[2]**Ib., I, p. 227.**

ment of speech, in the literary circles which he haunted. "I then witnessed for the first time the spectacle of a fairly large mixed company talking freely about scabrous facts. Then for the first time was I eased from the strain of pretending in a mixed company that things were not what they in fact are". He heard poems recited by people who "would not at any rate pretend that they were ashamed of the emotion of poetry". He began, with Taine's *Thomas Graindorge* as a model, to make vivid and subtle sketches of Parisian life. Let whoso wishes to realize how far Bennett had got into the understanding of French conditions and daily life turn to the first pages *of Paris Nights:* those short chapters on bourgeois homes, French servants, the French theatre, etc., bear witness to an extraordinary gift or sympathy.

Of France however and of French society he had at this date only touched the skirts or fringe. He lived in a world of cosmopolitan Britishers, rich idlers and artists—a highly refined, delightful and sophisticated milieu. For once that he may have dined in a middle class family, he took twenty or fifty meals at Laperouse or the Bouillon Duval where in 1903 took place his memorable meeting with the original of Sophia Baines. He somehow formed his idea of French morality from the French stage which was at its best represented by Donnay, Porto-Riche, Brieux, at its worst by the Cigale *Revues* or the dancing girls of the Moulin-Rouge cancan. The first volume of his *Journals* is full of references to Paris "sans-gene" (you know what he means thereby), to incredible stories about *cocottes* paying their coachmen "in kind", crimes passionnels, maitresses, femmes entretenues, maquereaux, etc. He dined with dancers and

actresses; the "Card" from the Five Towns has become a Parisian roue or thinks he has. He is reading Casandva. The editor of *T.P.'s Weekly* complains that his chronicles reveal a "universal contempt for women". Here we touch perhaps the secret of Bennett's relative failure to produce a masterpiece at this stage: the lack of any firm moral purpose, the levity and superficial vulgarity of a nature which has not yet discovered its own weaknesses and strong points.

Bennett probably realized all this. In particular, his determination to marry at forty seems to point in that direction. By the beginning of 1904 he had solemnly advised his family of his intention. In 1905 he was more firmly decided than ever.[1] He felt the need of settling down before launching on something big. He saw that by undertaking new responsibilities and by creating for himself within the frame of a congenial atmosphere a more regular and quieter style of life he would stimulate the creative activities which were in him, and not lessen them as marriage often does for other types of writers. It follows that it was the artist as well as the bourgeois who craved for this change of condition. It is all the more important to emphasize this as an attempt has been made[2] to prove that Bennett more or less married out of spite, after an unfortunate love-affair which left its scars on him to the end of his life. It is necessary to consider, as far as is possible, Bennett's sentimental life at the time so as to find whether such a notion can be accepted.

He had always understood women. When a child, he

[1] *Journals*, I, pp. 176 and 205.
[2] Dorothy Cheston Bennett. A.B. 1935, *passim*.

preferred girls' to boys' papers. As editor of *Woman,* he had probed the recesses of their hearts. In fact, he knew them too well not to feel a little antagonistic. What his early affairs may have been, one gathers from the closely autobiographical record of *A Man from the North.* Like so many of his heroes, he was alternatively attracted by two contrary types of women: the mysterious, wilful-enigmatic type such as Ruth Earp, Lady Queenie Paulle or Hilda Lessways, and the loving-tender one such as Nellie Cotterill, Christine or Janet Orgreaves. Between the two he long remained undecided. As it was, it certainly was no inexperienced youth who crossed the Channel when he came to live in France. His liberation and transformation would not have been complete if, along with Parisian taste, Parisian friends and a Parisian flat, Bennett had not had a Parisian mistress. In 1903 and 1904 he was seeing a great deal of a French chorus-girl whom he discreetly calls C.L. in the *Journals* and who supplied him with his stock of improbable stories about *rastas, viveurs and femmes entretenues.*[1] All this was part and parcel of the Parisian existence which he had decided to lead. He soon felt (from a human and artistic point of view) the emptiness of it. By April 1906 he was acquainted with an American girl, Miss Eleonora Green, a sister of the novelist. Two months later they became engaged. But the "crystallization", which perhaps had been a little too sudden, did not survive the test of time. Six short weeks later the engagement was broken off.[2]

In January 1907[3] Arnold Bennett who was looking for a

[1]*Journals,* I, pp. 118,124,136,145,173.

[2]Ib., I, pp. 230,234, 235.

[3]This date should be noted as Mrs. Bennett somewhat loosely dechrrd in her book on Arnold Bennett (1924) that she first met her future

part-time secretary to help him with his literary work and correspondence was introduced to Marguerite Sbulie by his friend Calvocoressi. He at once accepted her services. Mademoiselle Soulie (now Mrs. Arnold Bennett) had come to Paris from her home near Montauban to live with an aunt who had offered her a responsible post in the "maison de haute couture" which she superintended. But her interests were chiefly in the direction of dramatic art and she availed herself of her residence in Paris to take courses in elocution. She could recite French poetry with distinction and originality and had appeared on several stages. When she met Arnold Bennett she. had just returned from a prolonged stay in England where her aunt had advised her to go to learn the language. Her knowledge of English made her services doubly acceptable. Bennett was attracted by her good presence and striking personality. On his return from a two-months' stay in Italy in the spring, she nursed him through a brief but violent illness which had overtaken him in his bachelor's flat. He thus had occasions to note her remarkable qualities as housewife and organizer of a home. After consulting several of his friends, he asked her to marry him. In the course of May they were engaged and their wedding took place on July 4, 1907, at the Mairie du IXe Arrondissement.

It is impossible to ascertain exactly what lies behind the facts which have just been stated. But there is no proof that the affair with Miss Green left any lasting mark on Bennett's life. If we admit, as it seems we must, the evidence

husband in the "winter of 1906". By this she meant the winter of 1906-1907, but her statement was interpreted as referring to the beginning of 1906. Hence many misconceptions. Mrs. Bennett is positive that the first interview took place on January 16,1907.

of the poem *A Love Affair,* composed in August and inserted in the *Journals,* it seems that Bennett did not agree with her on many points:

> Wit she had none to amuse,
> Knew not the trade of a wife,
> Heard not the voice of the Muse. Now the Muse
> Was his life.

That Bennett was disappointed in his expectations and suffered in his pride, perhaps acutely, I am ready to admit. That the life of this bachelor of forty was thereby blasted, and his personality definitely modified, I simply refuse to believe.

When he first met Marguerite Soulie six months later, he had, at any rate, completely recovered. His desire to marry, which, as we know, existed before he ever met Miss Green, still survived. It is easy enough to understand what attracted him to his future wife: as a man, her beauty and personality; as an artist, her talent; as a native of the Five Towns, her Parisian characteristics; as a practical man, her domestic assets. It would be wrong, in forming an opinion of the facts now considered, to allow oneself to be prejudiced by the fact that fourteen years later Arnold Bennett and his wife separated by mutual consent. The misunderstanding came many years after. In the beginning at least Bennett found the company of his wife not only pleasant but stimulating and instructive. From the inevitable quarrels which arose out of their diverging personalities, he derived no uncertain benefit as a psychological novelist (cf. *These Twain).* Let any fair-minded reader turn to the pages of the *Journals* in 1907-1908 and he will be struck by the change in

tone which occurs, as the entries become less frivolous and fragmentary to assume a deeper meditative character. Anyhow the facts are there: before 1907 Bennett had failed to do any work of the first order. During his engagement to Miss Green he had "with the utmost difficulty finished his novel *Whom God Hath Joined*".[1] Three months after his marriage he sat down at the neat little desk *in* his house at Fontainebleau and began *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* of which he had been thinking for years as his *magnum opus* but which he had not yet dared to begin. The allegation that this very activity as a writer is a proof of his comparatively unhappy married life and shows that he had to take refuge from reality into literature and incessant work is a mere ingenious paradox.

If one is justified in labelling the years 1907-1921 in the career of Arnold Bennett as years of success, success complete and continuous, the period 1907-1912 should come under the heading of years of intense preliminary work. His fame, when it came, was not sudden and gratuitous. It had been hard-won and well-deserved. These were, in his own words, the days of "the industrious calm of honeymoon." In this polygraph of forty, marriage did not release a torrent of sentiment and romanticism. But it created a sense of security and equilibrium, an atmosphere of calm, studious leisure, seriousness and concentration by which his work much benefited. It acquired what it had lacked so far—solidity and conviction. Arnold Bennett was no longer the boulevardier, the man about town. He had

[1] *Journals,* **I, 235.**

elected to reside in the country. As a bachelor he had visited Fontainebleau and spent a few weeks there on several occasions. He now rented at Les Sablons the upper floor of a small house, the property of an ex-porter of the P.L.M. Company, Lebert, whose name will remain associated with *The Old Wives' Tale.* By October Bennett had definitely taken and furnished the whole house. The *vieux garcon* was settling down with a vengeance. He now had a home of his own, a wife of his own. He was seized with a fury of organization. He organized the house, fixed up the geyser-bath and the salamander and regularly pressed his trousers beneath the mattress. He organized his leisure, taking long rambles in the woods or starting on adventurous cycling tours. Chiefly he organized his creative faculty: by October he had begun *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* and devoted much time (a thing which he had never done to the same extent before) to the mere planning or construction of the novel. He would start off early and return after a couple of hours during which he had thought out with minute precision the smallest details and the most subtle joints of his story. The writing of the episodes followed without difficulty. He had now created his famous technique. The fabric of his book was proof against criticism. It was as strong and close as if it had been made out of Fontainebleau timber.

A few details will give unmistakable proof of the extent to which Bennett had "settled"; of the completeness of the change that had come over him. He had always been attracted to calligraphy and at the beginning of 1908, being in London, he spent considerable time at the British Museum examining the illuminated books and manuscripts. He

made up his mind to compose *The Old Wives' Tale* directly in this elaborate type of script. And he duly carried out his intention. In this paradoxical undertaking he may have been guided by commercial reasons: the manuscript of his book would thus be unlike the manuscript of any other masterpiece; it would have intrinsic artistic value as well as high literary interest. He may have wanted to strike a pose——the well-known pose of the automatic writer who produces work to order, with hardly any difficulty or artistic scruple—of the djinn, juggler or acrobat who would succeed in writing with his left hand or even with his feet if challenged to; but it is probable that just as when he wanted to avoid stammering he had to speak slowly and with great emphasis, he found that this additional difficulty in the physical act of writing made the composition of his novel still clearer and more deliberate.

He was also studying Latin—and actually writing, or trying to write poetry—two signs of abnormal, almost morbid seriousness of disposition in Arnold Bennett. When he was in Paris he occupied his leisure by visiting the Magasins du Louvre or the Galeries La Fayette and observing the complex organization of these great concerns. In April 1908 he noted with pride and satisfaction that his "control over his brain" had considerably increased.[1] He was writing for *The New Age* a series of articles called *The Human Machine.*

But the Human Machine was happy. It would be absurd to describe the period which followed Bennett's marriage as idyllic. In June 1908 he noted that, in Fontainebleau, he often "lacked male society". What married man has never

[1] *Journals,* I, p. 287.

had regrets of his bachelor life? Besides there can be little doubt that between the English husband and the French wife there were already words, differences, quarrels. Pauline Smith who knew them shortly afterwards has described those "Anglo-French rows", the "impetuous complaints" of the one, the "difficult" moods of the other. They quarrelled as Hilda and Edwin quarrelled and were none the less happy. "One day I shall look back to the evenings here, in the room where I work and sleep, with M. sewing or trying things on her mannequin . . . with regret as a perfect time". Thus in November 1907. When he returned to Fontainebleau in March 1908 after a three months' stay in England he noted "Je me plais infiniment dans ce pays". He travelled not infrequently in England, in the South-West of France (September 1908), in Switzerland (January 1909), in Italy (April 1910), in Brittany (July 1910). But he always liked to return to his house and chiefly to "his forest" whose silence and straight avenues stimulated in him the constructive faculty.

This atmosphere if not of positive happiness at least of cheerful serenity, so exceptional for Bennett, is .to be found in the first part of *The Old Wives' Tale* written during the autumn of 1907, just before he left for England. The description of the two * inseparable sisters in their commercial surroundings has a charm, a lightness of touch, a sort of feminine ripple which Bennett never quite recaptured. The style is unctuous, human, with a sort of repressed chuckle that recalls Thackeray or Daudet. When he returned after a few months spent in England he had written *Buried Alive* and arranged to publish *Books and Persons* in *The New Age*. He at once resumed *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale.*

But the glamour had gone—perhaps never to return. His honeymoon was over. He was no longer the yoiing man that he had almost been for a few short weeks.

Maupassant and chiefly Stendhal were the stern models which he had constantly in mind when writing the last three parts of his novels. By the end of August the masterpiece (I refer to the exquisite handwriting of the manuscript as well as to the literary excellence of the book) was finished. It was published in England a few weeks later. No publisher could be found in America and the copyright was lost.

But not for long. The success of *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* was not immediate and sensational; it was gradual and steady. Yet at the same time it cannot be described as slow. By February 1909 the book was "selling"; it was in its third edition and a continental issue (abridged) was being prepared for Tauchnitz. In fact at this early date Bennett was already "someone". The unimportant author of *The Statue* had grown into a figure in the literary world. How much of this was due to the great novel which was gaining recognition, to the large sale of *Buried Alive,* to the attention attracted by the practical hints given in the articles on *The Human Machine* or to the poisoned darts and effective praise of Jacob Tonson cannot, as already indicated, be exactly gauged. In April Bennett met Galsworthy and we may infer from the triumphant tone of the entry in the *Journals* that they met on equal terms. But then Bennett had boldly criticized Galsworthy in *The New Age.* The influence of the critic added weight to the work of the novelist. Signed reviews appeared in papers which had never before mentioned the work of Bennett. Soon a publisher rose from the

mists of American indifference. By October Doran had not only sold two editions of *The Old Wives' Tale* (2,000 copies) but he was clamouring for more books. Bennett was invited to contribute to *The Nation.* A Russian translation of *Buried Alive* was being published.

It is characteristic that this belated fame had a bracing, not a relaxing influence on his faculties. In May 1909 he was already "constructing" *Clayhanger*—probably the most patient and disinterested of all his novels. For nearly nine months he accumulated notes and documents to supply an accurate historical background to his work. This was an unprecedented effort on his part and he never repeated it. The novel was begun at Brighton, continued at Florence in the course of a dismal spring, finished at Fontainebleau in the summer amid the helpful influences of the "forest". It was at the end of the same year that the author of *Clayhanger* met at the house of Mrs. Edwards, Quai Voltaire, the future author of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu.* He made no impression on Bennett, as the latter, many years after, blushingly admitted.

With *The Old Wives Tale* and *Clayhanger* on.the market Bennett might have been content to rest and wait till the scales had been completely turned in his favour by the weight of two such masterpieces. But he added in 1911 *The Card* which continued the vein of *Buried Alive; Hilda Lessways* which indeed was due to the readers as the continuation or rather counterfoil of the sentimental story contained in *Clayhanger;* and *Milestones,* written in less than ten days, which was to achieve the great stage success on which Bennett had set his heart but which he had so far vainly courted.

How could the fates withstand such a combination of talent, industry, luck and self-confidence? They had to give in and confess that they were beaten. Bennett's tour to the United States in the autumn of 1911 set the seal on his triumph and prepared further consecrations. During the crossing he allowed himself some rest and became lost in the contemplation of life on the transatlantic liner, especially the technical side of the vast and complex hotel service in its various sections: here were the Galeries Lafayette and Harrods, the Strand Palace Hotel and the Savoy rolled into one with all the poetry of the sea around it. But when he landed, as soon as he had been met by Doran and his escort of journalists and photographers, work began anew. In New York, in Chicago, where he was almost mobbed by women-admirers, in Indianapolis, in Philadelphia, he was haled from publishers' offices to dinner parties, from press banquets to literary clubs. He was now duly advertised by the world's most expert advertisers. "Tell Mr. Bennett he stinks", was the message conveyed to him over the telephone from an American citizen obsessed by the intolerable publicity campaign waged on his behalf. But it was the stench of fame.

And now came money, the one genuine proof of a wide literary reputation. It came suddenly, pouring in from all sides, at such a rate as even the overweening young editor of the nineties had probably never dared to hope or ventured to forecast in his most sanguine moments. Not only was his work accepted and invited everywhere, not only was it translated in the best French literary reviews, but he found, not without amazement, that in the course of the year 1912 he had made £16,000, more than he had earned

during the whole of his previous life. He now bought a car, a yacht, a country house: he was a rich man.

This memorable year—1912—he described in his *Journal* as one of "worldly success and intestinal failure". He was already suffering from that insidious disease, sometimes diagnosed as "slowness of the work of the colon", from which he probably died. As if the body had rebelled against the tireless activity of the mind.

He now (1913-1914) began to slacken the pace. He wrote as much, for no less money, but stuff of a much lighter kind: *The Regent, The Price of Love, Don Juan.* He had definitely left Fontainebleau in April 1912. In his new residence of Comarques (Thorpe-le-Soken), an old Georgian country house named after the Huguenot family that had owned it, he could indulge his taste for organization and stately hospitality. But there was no forest of Fontainebleau. There were instead daily trains to London and guests for the week-end. With the change of residence came also a subtle change in his personality and in his work. He drove his car and cruised on his yacht. He had less leisure, or at least less solitude. He delayed thq writing of the third part of *Clayhanger (These Twain)* which he felt must be different from the rest of the trilogy. For the first time we seem to espy on the brow of the wealthy author, of the society man and member of the Yacht Club the shadow of impotence and exhaustion.

Then came the war which might have closed his career; he might never have come up to the surface; he might have been the last of English realists, the author of *The Old Wives Tale* and of *Clayhanger.* At first indeed the curtain seemed to fall: the publication of *The Price of Love* in **the**

Daily News was suspended; the prospective tour of *Milestones* in the provinces, postponed; the takings at the Kingsway Theatre where *The Great Adventure* was being produced sank to the lowest figures. There came news that owing to the glut of English copy the American market was closed to English authors. But the unforeseen happened. In August he was requested to write on the war by several papers. He bravely accepted and started with a typical article on "What the German conscript thinks". Who knew then what the German conscript thought? But Bennett did not hesitate for a minute. From the ashes of the realistic novelist a sprightly journalistic phoenix had arisen.

He contributed regularly to English, American, French newspapers. He was no longer merely a literary man. He had become a figure in that new war society, so different from the pre-war one, which had emerged in the great convulsion. He was Military Representative on the Thorpe Division Emergency Committee and devised elaborate instructions in case of raid or invasion. He was on the Wounded Allies Committee. In 1915 he was sent on a three week?' tour to the front as best qualified to inform and galvanize public opinion. He now devoted one day and a half per week to the confection of articles on practically every subject, some of which have been collected in the volumes of *Things that have Interested Me.*[1] No wonder his literary work suffered. *These Twain,* the last part of *Clayhanger,* shows a marked falling off as compared with the beginning of the novel. This is still more noticeable in *The Roll Call,* a purely adventitious sequel to *These Twain,* and in *The Lions Share* one of the worst novels Bennett wrote.

[1]Especially Volume I published in 1921.

And yet his capacity for writing admirably in the midst of work of an obviously inferior or mechanical nature was well illustrated in that period. Witness the last pages of *The Roll Call*—witness chiefly *The Pretty Lady.*[1] Curiously enough it was. this bright, tender, cynical study which recommended Bennett to the attention of Lord Beaverbrook and determined the latter to offer him the post of Director of British Propaganda in France in his Ministry. This appointment which only lasted for a few months had however great importance in the development of Bennett's career. He was now lifted from the sphere of literature and journalism into that of political life and high finance. He was no longer an author proper; he became a theatre proprietor, a capitalist, an influence. He was the man who could write *Lord Raingo* if he had only enough talent left to write it.

For this is indeed our problem, the one thing with which we are concerned. What had become of his creative faculty in the strain of all these activities? It seemed indeed, as might have been expected, that the threat of exhaustion which was already acute in 1914 was now more imminent than ever. Since *The Pretty Lady* he had published nothing of importance. A three act play which he wrote in 1920, *The Bright Island,* illustrates not only lack of form and inspiration, but actual enfeeblement of the intellectual faculties. The work which he did in 1921, *Lilian, The Love Match, Body and Soul,* though of higher quality, is however of a very light nature. *Mr. Prohack* is incomparably greater, but still in the light irresponsible vein. An event in his private life, which has already been discussed, was calculated to cause further alarm as to his future career. After a

[1] **1918.**

period of misunderstanding and tension Bennett and his wife separated by mutual consent.on November 23, 1921. While insisting on a separation he was most anxious to avoid a divorce: he had always been highly sensitive to ridicule. There can be no doubt that at the time he suffered acutely both in his pride and in his affections. Arnold Bennett who had foretold so many things about his future life, even the date of his marriage, had not in his most prophetic or voluntary moods predicted that he would separate from his wife at fifty-four. The machine had broken down. The accident came at a critical time. Was there nothing left but fatigue, sorrow and disillusion? Was the tireless pen at last condemned to rest or futility?

It was then that the miracle happened, that the human machine showed its infinite resource and sterling quality. Bennett determined to shake his past from him and, if it might be, to renovate his inspiration. He had done nothing really new since *Clayhanger.* The war had diverted his activities into fresh channels and saved him from exhaustion: by introducing war scenes and war atmosphere into *The Roll Call* and *The Pretty Lady* he had contrived to write two novels of a comparatively original type—the latter especially. But this could not go on. When he resigned his post as Director of Propaganda in France in 1918 he had the elements for writing a novel on the lines of *Lord Raingo;* but it is characteristic that he did not. He waited nearly six years before he attempted the theme. Because the creative faculty had deserted him for the time being—perhaps for ever.

The world still feverish and bruised in all its limbs was plunging into an orgy of noise and revelry. The continent,

France more particularly, became a land of jazz music, night entertainments and large hotels of the most modern type. No sooner had Bennett exchanged with his wife the deed of separation than he hastened to the Riviera on board the yacht of his friend Bertie Sullivan, the *Amaryllis.* But the yacht soon broke down and Bennett was more often at Nice and Cannes than on the sea. However he was more in need of noise and society than of solitude and rest: he haunted all the fashionable resorts, he gambled at roulette: chiefly, he danced enormously. Pauline Smith gave him a few lessons which were very necessary and the middle-aged novelist whirled like a young thing to the sound of the Riviera music. By the end of January 1922 he had finished *Lilian,* one of his lightest and most cynical novels in which can be recaptured the carefree voluptuous atmosphere of his existence at the time.

This sudden blaze would in all probability have been short-lived and the increased gusto with which he now regarded life and his work would soon have given way to weariness and sheer physical fatigue. Arnold Bennett was dancing; well and good. But what was to happen when the music stopped as it needs must soon? It was then that he met at Liverpool, where she was acting a part in the Playhouse production of *Body and Soul,* Miss Dorothy Cheston, an actress of much beauty and charm. Their acquaintance grew in the course of 1922 and ripened at the beginning of 1923 as appears from the publication of part of the novelist's correspondence.[1] Miss Cheston had on

[1] *Arnold Bennett; a Portrait done at Home together with* **170** *Letters from A.B.,* **by Dorothy Cheston Bennett, 1937.**

Bennett an undeniable influence. They met regularly, they dined out, they danced. She was the cause of his mixing far more intimately than he had done so far with the brilliant and highly emotional world of the stage. Bennett breathed in deeply not only the beauty, the voluptuous glamour of this society but also the romance and poetry of it. Lastly she played music to him, with him. With that key, she unlocked his heart or at least fumbled mightily at the rusty wards. Under the spells of this fairest Vivian the old enchanter was gradually awakening before he relapsed into a heavier sleep. In her own words she caused him to open "the subjective compartment of his being", "gave the subjective side of his mind an airing".[1] She encouraged him to "analyse himself" and "concentrate on the irrational element in him".[2] Now, from an artistic point of view (the only one with which we are here concerned) this was obviously dangerous. Not only because Bennett's talent was of a rational kind, because his greatest work had been done "on the objective plane", at the expense of the sentimental and the spontaneous, by sheer force of stark realism; but also because these emotional impulses which she now tried to awaken in him, already existed, formed the least valuable material of his artistic self and had been gradually conquered in the course of a hard struggle as *Sacred and Profane Love, The Glimpse,* even some parts of *The Old Wives[9] Tale* help to show. The greatness of Arnold Bennett was not unconnected with the murder of a tenth-rate sentimental novelist who had silently and very properly been done to death about 1907 or 1908. Why drag this

[1]pp. 85 and 88.
[2]*Journals,* III, p. 249.

skeleton from the cupboard? It must be owned that the spectacle of Arnold Bennett signing his letters "Little", or "Little Mr. Dot", or using unexpected pet names (such as "mon oeuf") or (worst abomination) dropping into vile style or even faulty grammar is not a pleasant one. This "softening" influence might have made Bennett too soft. With the approach of old age and senility the critic has a glimpse of a maudlin sentimental novelist that Bennett's indefatigable industry and financial needs would have made particularly repulsive and nefarious. One remembers the harrowing end and constant sobs of Darius Clayhanger, the hard-boiled realist who had never shed a tear. Was Bennett to go back to his early perversions, to Ouida and *The Girl's Own Paper,* to "pink shades" and the ecstasies of romantic love Was he to drift into the shallows of feminine amateurism? The danger was however illusory, at least at this stage. It might have been real either earlier (had he for instance married Eleanor Green in 1906) or later (if he had survived till after his sixty-fifth or seventieth year). But he was then so sure of his technique, so deeply entrenched in his methods of impersonality and self repression,-so steeped also in an atmosphere of worldly materialism, that he could safely undergo these influences. On the contrary it seems that some such revival of the spiritual or emotional faculties in him was just what was wanted to save his art from the gradual hardening and exhaustion with which, as we seen, it was seriously threatened. The plain fact is the years 1922-1926 he wrote *Riceyman Steps, Elsie a Lord Raingo, Accident,* each of which possesse merit, though in a varying degree. And the most felicitous effects are due to

pressed sympathy or disguised compassion which, to tell the truth, was not quite absent from his earlier works such as *The Pretty Lady,* but now reasserted itself in a purer, and as it were, more classical manner. For the miracle was that this latent power of emotion was never let loose 'but always subdued and kept well in the hand of the artist—toned down or even chastely concealed by means of irony or semi-contemptuous pity. This (comparatively) new aspect of his talent is revealed in the Delphine of*Lord Raingo,* even in the Lucass couple of *Accident,* but it was in the characters of Elsie and Joe that he achieved such genuine triumphs as give to both novels the kind of mellow Russian atmosphere which he had often aimed at creating but had so far never really captured. Here we can glimpse a Bennett almost on the verge of tears yet grasping his tools more firmly than ever and not a muscle moving on his face. He had thus secured not only a prolongation of his creative faculty but also an actually new development of his genius. This is further exemplified by the fact that in none of these great later novels he returned to the provincial atmosphere of the Five Towns. *Riceyman Steps* took the critics by surprise. They required some time to realize that a new Bennett, as great as if not greater than the Bennett of Burslem, was now rampant in Clerkenwell. He had escaped from a circle which the full length had been run into a new, possibly er, sphere.

h is true and should be duly admitted. There is of her, and less fortunate aspect of the story. t had undertaken to pay his wife a large Sheston Bennett has stated that soon after acquaintance he began to help her in

her stage career.[1] When she had given him a daughter in the spring of 1926 she came to live with him at 75 Cadogan Square. And the additional cost of the bringing up of Virginia Mary was not by any means a negligible item as every reader of that most original short story, *The Wind,* will realize. But chiefly the birth of a child had reawakened in Bennett the provincial sense of bourgeois responsibilities. His reaction, when the news was broken to him, was typical "I shall have to work harder".[2] He must provide for his family. He gave up his yacht ("you can't have a baby and a yacht") he tried to be "more careful". But he had habits of comfort and luxury which he could not well change. His expenses went on increasing. He refers in his correspondence with his nephew Richard to the "plague" and "curse" of having to pay one's income tax.[8] Towards the end of 1930 he was unfortunately moved to take a new flat or rather two contiguous flats at Chiltern Court, Baker Street, which resulted in new and considerable expenditure. There was only one solution: work and still more work. And this as he was getting on in age and his strength weakening. It was in the midst of this terrific strain while editing a paper and writing innumerable articles, short stories, plays, critical papers, books of travel, books on religion, film plots, etc.—that he undertook what he thought to be the greatest work of his life—an ambition which had hovered before his eyes ever since he had written *The Grand Babylon* twenty-five years ago—a realistic novel

[1]op. cit., p. 72; see also p. 73 ("I was no longer faced with actual necessity").
[2]Ib., p. 281.
[3]See also A.B., by Dorothy Cheston Bennett, p. 238.

of which a big London hotel was to constitute the background setting and all-pervading atmosphere. • And he treated the theme in a correspondingly epic form: not only for length but also for the number of characters involved, the minute and precise delineation of each and his special zone of influence. During the last three years of his life he dragged the book with him like an incubus. The tension was extreme yet he never relented. But in his letters to Dorothy Cheston or to Richard Bennett the ominous words "fatigue", "exhaustion" recur with increasing frequency. At last in 1930 the book was finished, revised, printed, published. Arnold Bennett was worn out. His last and perhaps most characteristic tale had been the measure of his own life. Vainly was he taken to Paris for a short holiday at the New Year. As soon as he returned, he was taken ill. Typhoid fever was at last diagnosed. For many weeks, in that large modern flat at Chiltern Court which he had rented and furnished at the cost of his own life, he lay ill, inert, semi-conscious. He died on March 27,1931. During these two months' enforced rest he had leisure (more perhaps than ever before) to reflect on the amazing success of his career. He may have seen it as represented in Max Beerbohm's witty cartoon which he liked so well—a dialogue between the Old and the Young A.B., one proud of having carried out the ambitious plan, the other of having conceived it. But probably the various stages and aspects of this career rose in more numerous and confused allegories. He saw the successful school boy who had won the prize essay at Newcastle-under-Lyme, the triumphant free-lance who had just got a story printed, the pushing sub-editor, the efficient and responsible editor, the Bedford-

shire farmer, the Parisian journalist, the author of *The Old Wives*[9] *Tale* on his noisy American tour, the war journalist painting in the ruins of a village, his office at the Ministry of Information, Edwin and Hilda, Raingo and Delphine, the Velsa, the Marie-Marguerite and the Forest of Fontainebleau. . . . From this continuous unbroken series of successes on and through the years and in spite of vicissitudes and world calamities he had derived great benefits—praise and glory as an artist, love, influence and money as a man; the author, the voluptuary, the business man, the journalist, even the inveterate romantic in him had all had their large share of satisfaction and satiety—they had all extracted from the constant colossal labour of Arnold Bennett the gratification of their many desires; but this hard-working Bennett was at last raising his head in his belated hour of rebellion and freedom; the sweated drudge, the mechanized worker, the underpaid hand was questioning the right of all those who had so long and so mercilessly exploited him to carry on their mercenary enterprise. He at last was laying down his tools and demanding rest since it was too late for the happiness which he had denied himself. No more words to write, no more ideas to choose and catch, no more incidents to connect and construct, no more proofs to revise, no more false leisure, no travel notes, no journal to keep any more, the end of fatigue and neuralgia and constipation and depression and strain. His last breath as with most of us was one of relief.

Such was Arnold Bennett. First and foremost, a Man from the North. Essential features of his literary personality are connected with this "Northern" origin. We have already seen what he owed to his puritanical upbringing.

Yet it is chiefly as a "Man from the North" that he felt in honour bound to conceal his feelings, minimize their importance or even deny their reality. Bennett is a master of realism not so much because he is vividly affected by the sights of the external world as were Zola or the Gotlcourts, but pre-eminently because he can, through sheer force of repression, check his most spontaneous reactions and thus see the world undistorted by sentimental values. Dorothy Cheston found that he was "not interested in himself" analytically.[1] This rendered possible a detachment which is, in literature, his great originality. His constant repression may have resulted, as some have claimed, in a lessening of his personality; it may have led to a form of unconscious hypocrisy; it may have been a means of concealing feelings of actual shyness or diffidence. The same is true of most "Men from the North" and Bennett shared in their strength and disadvantages. His habits of thrift in spite of appearances (he always kept a record of every penny spent), his practical sense, his shrewdness and efficiency which made him the Jasper Milvain of New Grub Street and were inborn rather than acquired in a solicitor's office, his ruthlessness, his grim scissory humour which is but another check to a possible outflow of sentiment—all these stamp him as unmistakenly born under the forty-third degree of latitude. At the same time it is to be noted that he is a *mm from* the north, not of the North. His desire was early to escape from the world to which he physically and mentally owes so much. His dislike of the Five Towns is violent, extreme, almost abusive in its frequent expression. The people of the Five Towns know it and have not forgiven him. London,

[1] op. cit., p. 8.

Paris, the Southern world are for him a sort of Promised Land to which he runs for shelter and pleasure. After the repressibns and starvation of the North they appear as toylands, fairylands, "cities to loot". They are filled with infinite "wonders which can be had for the asking, if one is bold and unscrupulous enough. In the words of Priestley, Bennett was and remained "a wandering prophet from the provinces staggered at the way he is getting on".

But, as we know, there is more than one man in Bennett. The "Man from the North" is also a "Man from the West". When he visited the United States he felt like the "son of an exiled mother coming home at last". For he found there his methods of efficiency and mechanical work carried further than in any other country,—a population of tireless, smooth-running human machines. He found an organization of the home, a profusion of "gadgets" and "contraptions" which fulfilled his wildest dreams of domestic comfort ("The American private house and I were destined for each other"). And he found in the mind of the citizens of the United States an instinct to be a little cleverer and smarter than anybody else, a disarming self-confidence, an understanding of publicity which went straight to his heart. "This is my sort of place," exclaimed Denry of New York in *The Regent.*

But (and here the paradox is heightened) he also belonged to the South. To the South of England, Brighton, Bournemouth, London where he chose to live and which was as different as Greece or Italy from the hard grimness of Staffordshire. He saw the Five Towns through the eyes of a Southerner as *The Matador* or *The Death of Simon Fuge* well show. But he also belonged to the Southern countries

of the continent. He could understand, admire, assimilate essential features of French and Latin civilization. I am not referring to his weakness for Parisian "chic" and glamour; to his passion for well-run continental hotels, or his appreciation of all the unexpected comfort and physical well-being of the Latin home. This might be reckoned (more or less accurately) as superficial. 1 am thinking of the Latin frankness and objectivity of his mind, of his understanding of the charm and unique quality of French conversation, his realization of the importance of the clear vision and admission of facts. "The Anglo-Saxon mind is hypocritical, pharisaical and intellectually dishonest. The Latin races are the intellectually honest ones." As a realist, he was Latin. And also as an artist: he was a water-colour painter; he practised calligraphy. His regard for style, his insistence on the value of technique, his condemnation of English practice in that respect, his life-long admiration for the workmanship of Flaubert and Maupassant show that his affinities were essentially Latin, more specifically French in that respect. *The Old Wives' Tale* was conceived in the Forest of Fontainebleau.

But his admiration for these faultless models of composition was balanced and outweighed by that of still greater artists: Balzac, Stendhal, the Russian novelists and chiefly Dostoevsky. He recognized that the formlessness of the latter was no bar to his literary excellence. He realized the value of contradiction (apparent more than real) and made full use of it in the psychology of his novels. To him the essential quality of a novelist was a "Christ-like all embracing compassion" which is of course typical of the Dostoevsky of *The Idiot* and *Karamazov*. But it is not absent

from Bennett's own work. In *Riceyman Steps,* in *Elsie,* among others, there runs a kind of vague oriental tenderness for the poor, while the detachment of Bennett's heroes, their strange passivity ("He had merely assisted at the episode in a kind of dream"—*Whom God Hath Joined,* etc.), the nondescript mysticism of *The Glimpse,* and chiefly his "inverted romanticism", his sense of the wonder and melancholy of life at the most ordinary and commonplace incidents—these induce us to believe that Dostoevsky may have struck a sympathetic Eastern chord in his heart.

But why insist on racial characteristics and similarities—real or imaginary? He was essentially the man of his trade, which he had freely and spontaneously chosen, not the product of any special corner of land, any special culture or civilization. What was this trade? "A journalist's first and foremost" will say some, including Arnold Bennett himself. "I began as a journalist, never ceased to be, have no intention of ceasing to be one" *(Savour of Life).* Indeed he possessed some of the essential qualities (or vices) of the confirmed journalist, including the capacity to exaggerate the emotional interest of trifles. But I should say, thinking of his heredity and environment as well as of his personal tastes, that he was more of a shop-keeper than of a journalist. Born in a pawn-shop, brought up in a draper's shop of the most commercial district of England, how could he help being commercially minded? Hence his desire to sell his goods, whatever they are, to make money; his contention that "novel-writing is a business like selling calico". Hence his swagger and aggressive confidence which is that of the commercial traveller, for hope and optimism are the soul of trade; and like a commercial traveller he wanted to be

well-dressed and boasted that he did not know how to blush. Hence his interest in organization, in big hotels and stores, in the services of British propaganda during the war. Hence also his high notion of commercial honour: his products might be expensive, but they must be-well done. He always wrote "as well as heaven permits" and never persevered in work which he could not do well ("I never bowed in the house of Rimmon of sentimentality"). He had a trademark and would not have consented to affix it to articles of inferior quality.

But he was more than a good craftsman; the pain and patience which he lavished on his works were out of proportion even with the big sums of money they brought in, or at least were not indispensable to this all-important financial consequence. There was in him, to quote Priestley again, "the serious soul of an artist and the mocking spirit of a literary trickster". It may be argued that the literary trickster was supreme and that the real artist came to the rescue and wrote *The Old Wives' Tale* only when it appeared that the efforts of the literary trickster were of no avail. But .the success of *The Old Wives' Tale* might have been exploited in a purely commercial manner—and this Bennett refused to do. In all his works, at least in all his novels (or nearly), artistic conscience is visible. In fact the conflict between the two tendencies is sometimes revealed. Then Bennett shows characteristically a sort of half-concealed irony for the too facile commercial success that he often seems to be exclusively pursuing. In the last pages of *A Great Man* when he compares the career of Tom Knight, the painter of genius, with the success of Henry, the popular novelist, or in the most moving pages of *Simon Fuge,* there

is no doubt that the artist is passing judgment on the businessman of letters. If Bennett was so willing to teach the secrets of his arts in his manuals and guide-books, it was because he well knew that the most important of all were incommunicable.

HI

FARCE AND MELODRAMA

THE critics have various attitudes with reference to Bennett's masterpieces; but only one about the many novels, tales, fantasias, etc., as he calls them, which preceded and accompanied them—one of complete disapproval and deprecation. Their opinion is on the whole morally and aesthetically justified; yet, on closer examination, it does not seem to be entirely reasonable. If some were written for money, others are more disinterested than is generally supposed. Above all, before so much industry and talent, one has really no right to feel virtuously indignant.

It is true that these novels may have hindered a fuller recognition of Bennett's real fame, that, in the words of Priestley, he is "buried alive behind all these books". It is undeniable that he was feeling his way, preparing the ground, wooing the public, and that what he then wrote turned out to be either mere farce, distinguished by lack of seriousness and an afflicting desire to be humorous at any cost,—or pure melodrama, often violently sensational, occasionally sentimental and maudlin. All this he himself acknowledged at an early date. "1 had sworn solemnly that I would keep the novel form unsullied for the pure exercise of the artist in me. What became of this high compact? I merely ignored it . . . I, apprentice of Flaubert et Com-

pagnie, stood forth to the Universe as sensation-monger."[1] What more could be said about it?

This much: that even his worst, his most mercenary books at that date were written with zest and gusto. Unreal they are no doubt, but they never proved to him an uncongenial task. To their author they were more like improbable fairy tales, dreams of "a youth who had outgrown his tin soldiers";[2] and they overflow with plentiful (if coarse) humour. Moreover, whoever has read them knows that Bennett did not merely copy the best sellers of his day in a servile endeavour to capture success. He introduced into his cheap tales and idiotic plots original tendencies which were to prove permanent features of his art. His interest in big commercial enterprise, especially when connected with the luxury trades (hotels, stores, theatres, etc.), is to be found there in a very precise form; Five Town characters and atmosphere are frequent though often presented in a highly artificial manner; last and chief, the greater writer, the master of a style entirely adequate to its subject matter, appears occasionally for two or three lines, for a paragraph, a page, or even a full story —and from a heap of rubbish or very ordinary material the reader picks up *The Matador* or *The Death of Simon Fuge*. No critic of Arnold Bennett has a right to ignore those books.

A little by itself, among the "humorous" novels, stands *A Man from the North* (published 1898). Its interest is two-fold. First, as already mentioned, the book is largely auto-biographical. There can be no doubt that the hero, Richard Larch, a Five Town clerk of literary ambitions, is a slightly

[1]*Tlte Truth about an Author,* Ch. XII.
[2]Priestley, op. cit.

modified picture of Bennett himself: efficient at business, miscellaneously and somewhat externally interested in the arts, proud, sensuous and high-strung, placed in the very situation of the Bennett of 1888-1890 and confronted with the same difficulties, he can be safely identified with his creator. Only, it is a slightly older and considerably more experienced man who holds the pen and dwells with a half-amused, half-cruel complacency on the illusions and errors of youth. More than any other work by Bennett perhaps this is a picture from life: Larch's Colleague at the office, Herbert Jenkins, was a mental photograph of a Mr. S — of whom he was soon to lose sight completely.[1]

This close (too close) adherence to real life was however less the result of immaturity or a weak imagination than an effort to observe *a priori* literary principles. We know that Bennett then considered himself as an apprentice of Flaubert and Co. This book was the outcome of a minute study of the French realists: Flaubert, Zola and chiefly Maupassant whose *Bel Ami* is explicitly mentioned as the model which the young writer had set himself. What is strange is that the imitation jis not servile, as is so often the case with juvenile enthusiasm, the atmosphere of the original not overdone. In fact one has to read the book with attention to detect the influence so positively asserted. One realizes however that it is certainly felt in the choice of the subject. "A clerk instead of fame and £1000 arrives ultimately at disillusion and a desolating suburban domesticity." This was ordinary and commonplace enough—nothing romantic or melodramatic in such a theme. The story was originally called "In the Shadow" and was to illustrate how "the usual can

[1] *Journals,* II, 162.

be miraculously transformed into the sublime". It would have been very adequately treated by Gissing, but Bennett had to do violence to his secret instincts in order to eliminate humour and optimism. Richard, he is careful to point out, is "myself, but made a failure". He further attributes a certain flow and rhythm which he recognizes in the tale to the influence of *The Yellow Book* (in which he had published a story) and the School of Wilde. It should with much more likelihood be attributed to the irrepressible confidence of the writer who could not help endowing even the most commonplace and prosaic theme with energy and humour. Many novels of Bennett are melancholy or dark in places but never as the result of financial incompetence on the part of his heroes. The influence of Flaubert and Moore is again apparent in the care and comparative leisure with which the book was composed between April 1895 and May 1896. Bennett amended and perfected his text constantly in his search for artistic perfection and accuracy, a method antagonistic to his talent and which he was never to repeat. In the catalogue of the Sale which took place at Messrs. Sotheby's on 25 May 1936 the manuscript of the novel is described as "containing much more rewriting than is found in those of the later novels". This at least was no mercenary book.

The result was disappointing. In spite of delicate reticence, an effort to give complete descriptions, and a constant desire to avoid artificial conclusions or rounding off chapters with sonorous phrases, despite the fact that the book has no ending and that some details (about Richard's private conduct in London) are cautiously daring, the story leaves no definite impression in the mind and is deficient in power and vitality.

Whether because his talent was not yet ripe, or because he was too conscious of his models, Bennett failed to give his characters the proper concentration and colour. The various features of personality are there but disconnected, not organized as is well seen for instance in Albert Jenkins. Moreover, regardless of Flaubert and Wilde, the style is not infrequently vulgar ("His spine assumed the consistency of butter" etc.). One thing however redeems the book and may give it permanent interest: the strong genuine expression of the sensuous surprise in the provincial as he discovers the wealth and luxury of London; his despairing envy; his wild desires and impulses, his distorted vision of the pleasures and corruptions of a large city—the sudden contact of a soul long starved of all artistic satisfaction with the aspects of beauty in its most alluring form. This at least is not "in the shadow", emerges from it, saves the book from the Hades of weak inefficient pastiche.

To realize the fetters in which Bennett was then writing nothing can be more instructive than to compare *A Man from the North* with *A Great Man* (1904). The novel is far less serious, the story utterly incredible; Bennett obviously penned it with his tongue in his cheek. We have deserted the domain of real if too conscious art for that of farce pure and unabashed. Henry Shakespeare Knight is the counterpart of Richard Larch. A clerk too, and in very much the same position, he is tempted to write, composes without difficulty the most absurd trash .. . and succeeds beyond all expectation. His original success which commands all the others is due to the fact that the manuscript of *Love in Babylon,* his first novel, is accidentally buried under a cargo of spring onions in Coventry Street. **But** the style has become

stronger and subtler, the humour is sometimes irresistibly grotesque (the "Letters to the Editor" of Henry's father are good comedy)[1] and the characters though wildly exaggerated are constructed and organized. Moreover, as a satire of the popular novelist ("I just sit down and write and they go mad over it") the book is not without some bitter charm. As already noted, by placing near Shakespeare Knight his cousin Tom, the real, if soured, artist, Bennett has passed sentence on the actual value of purely commercial literature. What is most interesting is that in Henry and Tom he is really sketching the two sides of his own nature, the cheap and commercial one as against the higher and more disinterested. While never rising above the plane of farce, a higher note is struck here and there and gives the story some pretence at seriousness.

It has been mentioned above that *Buried Alive* was written at the beginning of 1908, in the course of a two months' holiday in England, as a kind of recreation from the composition of *The Old Wives Tale* which was proceeding at Fontainebleau. Nothing could illustrate better the fulness of Bennett's creative power at this period, for *Buried Alive* probably represents the high-water mark of his efforts in the humorous novel. In spite of its lightness and improbability the book is strangely convincing. It is said to have originated in an incident recorded by the daily press—one of those queer impossible events which have time and again proved perfectly true—the story of a man who had attended his own burial. Bennett as a good

[1]They seem, however, to be directly inspired from Mr. Barmby's Epistles in Gissing's *In the Year of the Jubilee* with a possible reminiscence from *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford.*

representative of the realistic school of fiction liked to start from a simple document like a newspaper cutting as is well seen from *The Old Wives' Tale* in which two incidents at least (the shooting of the elephant and the public execution at Auxerre) were condensed or expanded from articles in the French and English Press.[1] But the art with which the incredible truth has been made to look almost possible is well-nigh perfect. The story is that of the shy painter, Priam Farll, who is tempted into exchanging his identity for that of his valet Henry Leek, the latter having died suddenly in the course of a short visit to London. Bennett was clever enough to compose and construct with minute care the life and character of Henry Leek who, being dead, never appears in the novel and yet determines indirectly the whole course of the story, in a way that is vaguely reminiscent of *The Death of Simon Fuge.* This, together with the Putney background which is firmly though unobtrusively set for the main action, contributes to create an atmosphere of reality. In a style which is always natural and only occasionally excessive Bennett contrives to write an alert narrative which sometimes recalls Wells at his best, sometimes, as in the interview between Alice, the two curates, and the first Mrs. Leek, has a very strong Shavian[2] flavour, sometimes even, in the last Court scenes and particularly that of the cross examination of Alice (which is directly reminiscent of Sam Weller's) rises to Dickensian verve and comic power; yet the greatness of the novel—and it is great of its kind—lies elsewhere. It lies in the

[1]Sce *Appendix,* p. 264.

''See in particular the corresponding scene, which is pure Shaw, in *The Great Adventure,* the stage version of *Buried Alive.*

freshness and charm of the two main characters. Priam Farll is probably the one frankly shy hero in the novels of Bennett: and he acquires thereby a tone of distinction which pervades the whole book. *Buried Alive* is the only comic tale of Bennett which does not leave an impression of vulgarity. Of course Farll has his moments of exasperation and audacity, and on the other hand we know that the cool impudence of Bennett's heroes conceals actual shyness and diffidence. But Farll is avowedly and professedly shy, and he is comparatively disinterested. Like most other heroes however he is no longer young; he has reached "the age, in sum, that is the most romantic and tender of all ages for a male. I mean the age of fifty. An age absurdly misunderstood-by those who have not reached it! A thrilling age." This adds to his charm: his is not the temporary shyness of the young man; it is an inherent, permanent quality which renders him lovable. As for Mrs. Alice Challice she is of course the great success of the book. Bennett has produced more careful, more analytical studies of women—Hilda, Leonora, Christine, even Lilian. But who would not exchange any of those, superior, in intelligence or sensuous appeal as they may be, for the ever-refreshing presence of Mrs. Challice? She is essentially natural, resolutely outside all manner of conventions and artifice. She simply refuses to be ashamed of her legitimate instincts, even in the witness box, and tells the counsel so much. Her frankness in discussing their intended marriage is astounding to Farll—terrifying and deHghtful. In brief "she did not deal in names, she dealt in realities". One may wonder by what strange untoward accident she was born in Putney and not in the Five Towns to which by right of

her firm grasp of reality she might seem logically to belong. But here Bennett was absolutely right and acted with unfailing artistic instinct: Alice is more mellow than her sisters of the North—Helen, Sophia Baines or Rachel of *The Price of Love.* Her real shrewdness and practical sense are less aggressive and far more human. She is of the same race as Elsie and Mrs. Arb. She has been touched by the softer influences of the metropolis and the South:

> She was a living proof that in her sex social distinctions do not effectively count. Nothing counted, where she was concerned except a distinction far more profound than any social distinction —the historic distinction between Adam and Eve. She was balm to Priam Farll. She might have been equally balm to King David, Uriah the Hittite, Socrates, Rousseau, Lord Byron, Heine or Charlie Peace. She would have understood them all. They would all have been ready to cushion themselves on her comfortableness. Was she a lady? Pish! she was a woman.

For she is also womanly, and her strength proceeds precisely from that realization of her function and destiny as a woman. She accepts Farll's shyness, she accepts his resolution not to work, she accepts his supposed madness, she even accepts his bigamy with a patience which is, we are told, only a form of comprehension, and which is only slightly exaggerated. Like Rachel she is ready to pay the "price of love", convinced that a woman's first duty is to stick to her man. Hence her comprehension despite her comparative lack of intelligence, her utter ignorance of the arts. And this is why she is "balm to Farll". She is to the very antipodes of that world of snobbery and conventions which Farll has hated and endured all his life. She is real to

him and makes life real. Mr. Simons, in his study of Bennett, wonders whether "a cultured painter could really be happy with a middle-class lady?" But this is missing the whole point of the novel. If Bennett has not succeeded in making this improbability convincing the whole book is a failure from the first line to the last.

The unwonted charm of these two characters should not make us blind to the wealth and power of burlesque invention displayed in the book. It is true that some episodes, like that of the collar and moles, might be described as farcical; that the satire aimed here and there at the Press or the Church is extremely superficial; that the situation itself of the man who attends his own funeral is not absolutely original or without literary precedents. In fact, in his description of the religious service at the abbey and the impression on Farll, Bennett may have had in mind a somewhat corresponding scene in *Erewhon Revisited.*

But it was a touch of genius to have made the susceptible Farll so impressed, both sentimentally and aesthetically, as to sob aloud in the organ gallery. This is really the culmination of the elaborate farce and transforms it into something deeper and also more bitter, a kind of satirical allegory not unworthy of Swift. It was a great pity that in his dramatic version of the book, *The Great Adventure* (1913), Bennett was forced to suppress this crowning scene. Of course in the process he dropped many other things as well, but the loss of this capital tableau is the great weakness of the play.

It certainly is an anticlimax to pass from *Buried Alive* to the humorous novels connected with the Five Towns. Of *Helen with the High Hand* very little need be said. It is an early book written in 1904 though published only in 1910.

Bennett described it as "a commercial failure and a literary success". It is difficult to agree to the second half of the statement. As all the Tales of local atmosphere it has the undeniable value of a document and is a contribution to the psychology of the Five Towns. It even reveals, as we shall see later, some important features of Staffordshire mentality which are not to be found elsewhere. And it certainly has some amusing pages. But the story is written with a swagger, a continuous tone of bravura which soon palls, and the spectacle of James Ollerenshaw, the old miser, and Helena Rathbone, his mercenary young niece, trying to get the better of each other in a world of universal deception is not by any means a pleasant one.

The two novels narrating the adventures of Edward Henry Machin *(The Card,* 1911, *The Regent,* 1913) have found favour with Bennett's critics. Mr. Phelps has praised their "delightful flashes of humour"; Mr. Simons finds them "excellent" especially the part dealing with Denry in his relation to his mother, the relentless Mrs. Machin; lastly Mr. Priestley has called them "the epic of the cocksure" and found .in them, though wasted on an unworthy theme, that epic breath and power of life-giving humour which is lacking in the serious novels—*The Old Wives' Tale* or *Clayhanger.* To be sure these high qualities are not revealed in the plots—a tissue of impossibilities and extravagance. *The Card* tells how "Denry" from a modest position as rent collector rises to fortune and the highest municipal honours by means of an" Universal Thrift Club" and several other commercial undertakings of doubtful public utility. His resource, his infinite pluck, his extraordinary luck are not sufficient to make the subject convincing, and

Bennett never really tries to make it so. In *The Regent* we have the old, somewhat facile theme of the provincial coming to town and deceiving the most experienced Londoners by means of his shrewdness and audacity. "Denry" is here concerned in a theatrical enterprise and mixes freely with the world of the stage. But he finally, in spite of overwhelming success, decides to sell his theatre and return for good to the Five Towns. There is undeniable humour in some parts of these two novels, especially the descriptions of municipal activities in *The Card* and the scenes of married life at the beginning of *The Regent,* but it is obvious that the interest centres round Denry, the other characters, especially the London ones, being vague or superficial. "Denry", "the Card" is what in the Five Towns is called a "character"—one who amuses and occupies public opinion and, having caught their fancy, is naturally credited with more than he has actually achieved so that a legend gathers around him. Bennett has given of him a picture which is not without care or subtlety. "Denry" is not naturally audacious, free from hesitation or doubt. On the contrary he is fundamentally shy: he stammers and from nervousness is incapable of making a good speech; he is afraid of giving his friends a big dinner and acting as host. But there is in him an impulse "that jumps up and forces him to do things" and once he has "taken an oath with himself" he cannot be shaken. In fact his brazenness is the result of cool reasoning ("she can't eat me" he argues with himself before he asks the Duchess of Chell to dance) and iron determination. It is a triumph of the will over a highly strung and naturally nervous temperament. Moreover he is at heart frankly unscrupulous: at school he won a scholar-

ship by fraudulently altering his marks, though since he has always been truthful "save in the gravest crisis'*. Such is the secret of his romantic spirit of enterprise, of his wonderful success in worldly affairs. A bit of a Dandy and of a Don Juan, musical, good looking and an expert gate-crasher, he is in fact a compact of timidity, audacity and vulgarity which, Bennett asserts, is the best material to make a successful adventurer. It is true that his creator has done his utmost to endow him with a kind of infectious humorous power which compels friends and foes to submit to his magnetic influence. "What great cause is he identified with?" objects Councillor Barlow. "He is identified," replies one of his colleagues, "with the great cause of cheering us all up." This disposes of all objections. Denry will be Mayor of Bursley. He would thus seem to become a picaresque figure, a sort of natural force, a Vivian Grey, a Tartarin of the North, an inexhaustible source of laughter like Falstaff. I frankly doubt that Bennett succeeded in his attempt, assuming that he aimed so high. These novels are not free from the taint of vulgarity which is Bennett's besetting sin. Though the "Card" has much in common with the author himself, the identification is not complete: Bennett was a hard worker and an honest artist, not a charlatan. Besides we know that there was a real original for Denry. Bennett has merely depicted from life a typical Five Town figure in a typical local setting.[1] But the local humorous novel demands more distinction and lightness of touch than he possessed. Bennett wrote in 1909 of *The Card:* "I think it is good honest every day work vitiated by my constant

[1]See *The Autobiography of The Card* by H. K. Hales; Sampson Low, 1936.

thought of a magazine public." From this judgment I for one shall hot appeal. *The Card* is a failure. But the experiment will not have been in vain. Much later Bennett will return to his rough sketch of Denry; he will touch it up, remove it from its Five Town background and purify it from all local imperfections; and he will create Lord Raingo.

We now must leave the clear light of day—or, if the phrase cannot be applied to Five Town gloom, the cheerful atmosphere of commercial success and municipal comedy which surrounds the Card to plunge in a world of murder, crime, mystery and death. Here instead of make-believe and escapades we encounter the grim realities of human life: dead bodies are no sooner found than they disappear to reappear a little later: bathrooms have secret doors from which rope-ladders hang. Danger surrounds the heroes in a multitude of forms: especially shooting from dark corners or through the windows of express trains, and poison—poison administered in insidious and almost inevitable manners as for instance on the neck of uncorked wine bottles. All means are fair to deceive the victims: false beards, false names, false landlords, false sign-boards, wax figures counterfeiting death. The most secret and solitary places are chosen for the treacherous deed, from yachts sailing in far off seas to Brompton Cemetery and the hollowed head of a gigantic statue! In this strange world we meet familiar characters: the pure fearless (preferably American) heroine; the fearless hero, sometimes English or French, but also apt to prove a German prince in disguise escaped from one of Anthony Hope's novels; the great criminal, so great that, his crime almost forgotten, he attains Napoleonic proportions, and becomes lovable like Louis

Ravengar, Mrs. Cavalossi, the terrible Mrs. Ilam, or fiendish Mrs. Uppottery who is the feminine incarnation of Uncle Pollexfen; sometimes the criminal is endowed with such insinuating charm that he becomes a hero with the thin hands, long moustache and decadent smile of Thorold; sometimes he is made particularly cruel and sinister, with a lust for blood, a desire for unnecessary murder, like the dreadful father of Teresa of Watling Street, crowned with the blood-red glare of lunacy; sometimes he is merely a blase millionaire who tries crime as a sport. For all their activities there is however a remarkable lack of motives: promises on death-beds, bigamous marriages, or, in desperate cases, nihilists' societies. But their passions are so violent that one should not wonder that they have so little time to think! Women look at them with "lustrous eyes" and at once they "would go through anything" for them; when captured by enemies they "stand like a statue of scorn" until, leaping "like startled tigers" they make good a last minute escape. A close study of the sensational novels of the time would no doubt supply parallels and sources for the extraordinary features of these novels. But one need not be very deeply versed in this department of literature to detect obvious influences: Ouida (for artificial passions and the aristocratic atmosphere), Anthony Hope for the "royal" hero, Conan Doyle, Gaboriau, Lecoq, Leblanc, Hornung for the technical details of each crime. Besides Bennett himself has given us the recipe for the concoction of such cocktails: you must take an exciting situation, pour a proportion of episodes each with a partial climax, mix with theatrical conversations and an atmosphere of wealth and splendour, avoid all squalor or the least pretence at

realism, crown with a grand climax which should be thought out first but revealed at the last moment, and, last but not least, give the beverage an arresting name: *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902), *The Gates of Wrath* (1903), *Teresa of Watling Strtet* (1904), *The Loot of Cities* (1904), *Hugo* (1906), *The Sinews of War*[1] (1906), *The City of Pleasure* (1907), *The Statue*[2] (1908). One must confess that for sheer impressiveness these titles, with their sonorous quality and Biblical associations, could hardly have been improved!

But there is something in these novels beside the stock in trade of the sensational literature of the period and, indeed, of all ages. Some of the situations and more particularly the setting in which the extraordinary adventures occur are new—not to be found or even foreshadowed in Mrs. Radcliffe, Poe or Eugene Sue. Chief among these is the Hotel world—far different from the inn of the old novels which could only be the scene of comical episodes or of sordid crime. Bennett's Hotel is the twentieth century palatial establishment, of Americanized organization, in which the latest discoveries of science are used to cater for the needs of mankind and more especially for their insatiable thirst for luxury. Bennett's Hotel is not a setting for mystery, terror or even love: it is creative of romance. It sets the stage not so much for the performance of *Hamlet* or even *Twelfth Night* as for *The Tempest* with Caliban cut out, the Miranda-Fernando episodes reduced to mere twaddle, and Prospero, Prospero in evening dress or in the white cap of a chef given an even more important part. Such are the Babylon Hotels or Devonshire Mansions of his tales. Later

[1] In collaboration with E. Phillpotts.
[2] ib.

on he will contrive to extract this atmosphere of romance from a close description of facts by sheer force of realism. But in *The Grand Babylon* he tries to obtain the same result by heightening the colours and wildly exaggerating the truth: the kitchens of the Grand Babylon cover an acre of space and are manned by more than a hundred chefs; the cellars are so large that they seem to be infinite. Bennett has also described the great stores of the Harrods and Selfridges type in his detective novels: the romantic effect is here perhaps more impressive still. Apart from the unusual setting—the various counters, the annual sale crowd—the author manages to reintroduce into the modern novel effects which had had to be banished since the medieval romances fell out of fashion: Hugo in chivalrous deference to the lady of his heart closes his stores at two o'clock on a Monday or gives her a gold token which will enable her to obtain without payment any article from any counter. It seems that the realm of the *Faerie Queene* is again thrown open to our dehghted eyes. It extends as far as The City of Pleasure where monstrous orchestras and storytellers' Halls are always ready for our enchantment while the money that we pay at the gate is piled as in Mammon's Cave in the gigantic subterranean Counting-House and affords pleasure to our eyes. Money? Another new source of romantic interest which Bennett endeavours to use in his sensational novels: his heroes may be financiers as well as hotel keepers or bandmasters. Through them we are made to discover the romance of money, the wonder of the mechanism of interest which causes wealth to accumulate endlessly. Do you know what a million is? Have you felt the artistic charm of the Stock Exchange?

All these elements, it may be argued, are distorted out of all connection with reality. But Bennett the realist docs appear in the least serious of these novels. This is chiefly seen in his descriptions of the various forms of diseases which play such a prominent part in all his tales. It is known that Bennett liked to make use of such cases in many of the stories, that he read medical dictionaries and asked his doctor friends to check the symptoms he described. But no one had ever thought before of introducing medical knowledge into romantic literature—to lay down one's heroes with measles or hay-fever. Yet we find here elaborate descriptions of catalepsy, heart disease, typhoid fever, pseudo angina, the best way to cure a chill, a rash, a fainting fit. This in a somewhat disconcerting manner lends an air of reality to the whole.

The Grand Babylon Hotel is generally selected by critics as representative of Bennett's guilty activities in the field of sensational literature. This is no doubt due to its connection with later novels of much higher value—*Imperial Palace* in particular. West terms it "a well-written extravaganza", Simons "his best fantasy". 1 would rather choose *The City of Pleasure,* with its atmosphere of luxury and successful commercial transactions, its splendid theatrical hero, its absurd melodramatic adventures, and deplorable sentimental plot, as the most typical. As for the most interesting, it is no doubt *The Statue* which in its elaborate description of the political world and more especially in its picture of Doncaster, the prime minister, gives us a first sketch, and by no means a contemptible one, of what Bennett was later to achieve in the admirable descriptions of *Lord Raingo*.

To one in search of thrills and sensations, the supernatural offered opportunities which it would -have been folly to overlook. *The Ghost* (1909) belongs precisely to the same class of novels as *The Grand Babylon* or *Teresa,* the one difference lying in the introduction of the ghost of Lord Clarenceux as one of the characters. It is nothing but a shocker pure and simple as appears clearly from such episodes as the murder of Aresca or the attempted poisoning of Rosa by her rival Carlotta Deschamps. It must be admitted that the ghost is managed with unusual power and vividness. Typically enough this visitor from the other world is conceived in a very realistic, even materialistic way: he smokes, travels in boats and trains, can mix with a crowd and yet escape immediate detection. It makes him in a way more impressive. But it shows how the objective mind of Bennett was impervious to mystical and spiritualistic influences. He himself averred that the .writing of the book had been "a great lark" and was not a little surprised when in 1926 the *Nouvelle Revue Frangaise* chose that penny shocker to begin the series of translations of his best novels which they intended to publish.

At one sentence in *The Ghost* we must however pause. "I had a glimpse of that other world which exists side by side of and permeates our own." This idea of another existence enfolded in our life and enfolding it was to grow and develop in Bennett's mind; in fact the preceding sentence contains the germ of the novel which was to become *The Glimpse* (1909). As is well known Bennett first wrote a short story with that title for the Christmas number of *Black and White;* in that form *The Glimpse* was but a record of the experiences of a man who, having remained some

considerable time in catalepsy, retains his consciousness and comes back to life with an impression that death is a gradual separation of the soul from the body and a slow transition from the material world to a more spiritual one of which we only are given "a glimpse" It is easy to understand that such a contribution professing as it does to give of the world after death a version which had no connection with Christian belief and ending with the ominous words "I have seen God" was not quite the right thing for a Christmas number and that it was turned down by a startled editor. Then Bennett added a very subtle human story to the "case", developed the pseudo-metaphysical part and turned it into a novel. He has himself told the story in *My Religious Experience:*[1]

> Many years ago I had a dream and in the dream I stood by my own dead body and saw the pennies upon my eyes. I cannot remember at this distance of time what the rest of the dream was, but it had to do with the adventures of the soul after death. This dream while it convinced me of nothing and gave me no faith in a future life made a considerable impression upon me as an artist, and I expanded the idea and the mood into a novel, which I called *The Glimpse,* the glimpse being of what lies beyond death. For the purpose of the novel I read a little in Oriental theology and philosophy, and out of that and out of such notions as I had previously met with I constructed a theory of the future and put it into a more or less realistic form.

The realistic part of the novel (the events leading up to the "death" of Maurice Loring) is admirable. Bennett has drawn with great subtlety the character of the selfish, unsympathetic husband and of the guilty, though at heart

[1]*Things that have Interested Me,* III.

honest, wife. The description of Loring's last moments, of the "pennies on the eyes" scene, as also of his rfesurrection at the precise minute when his wife is committing suicide is beyond all praise for careful construction and perfect dove-tailing of small details. The result is one of pure, simple, absolute truth. It is more difficult to pass judgment on the "mystical "part of the tale. It will be noticed that the best passages are those in which the material and spiritual worlds are mixed, and the one is described realistically from the point of view of the other. There are clever phrases and metaphors, as that of the large shop-window filled with dark-coloured goods which gradually become apparent if one looks intently through the bright reflection of the street outside; this being Bennett's remarkable symbol of how the spiritual world becomes visible through the world of matter. But on the whole the middle part of the book strikes one as long-winded and unconvincing. These adventures of a disembodied soul are so vague, so utterly devoid of any definite progression that one soon arrives at the conviction that, in spite of his "readings in Oriental theology", the writer had nothing precise to say and did not even say it very well. One soon gets tired of the "iridescence of the chromatic complexity of the radiant plane" or of the feel-ings that are "comprehended in all the folds of their emo-tion". This is vile English, the bad English that Bennett is apt to write when, like Balzac (but fortunately less often than Balzac), he tries to write well. Yet it would be rash to infer that he was not half sincere when he wrote *The Glimpse*. In spite of his assertion that the "supernatural parts of the novel were inventions" and that "he never had the slightest belief in the theories set forth" one cannot help

being impressed by the care and obvious complacency with which Befinett has developed this part of the novel. One calls to mind some of the short stories towards the end of his career in which spiritualistic phenomena are introduced —*Under the Hammer, The Dream* and especially the unfinished *Dream of Destiny*. In spite of continuous repression the mystic sentimental vein was ever ready to surge in the heart of the materialist. And we are left wondering whether the glimpse *was* a glimpse or a wink.

So far, in these many novels, I have not encountered a single one for which, with perhaps excessive indulgence, I did not find a word of justification or at least an excuse. I now come to the one novel by Bennett which strikes me as (artistically) inexcusable. And the tragedy is that, at least when he wrote it, he was under the impression that it would be a masterpiece. We have every reason to think that *Sacred and Profane Love* (1905) was conceived as a serious, disinterested work of art and that its author spared no pains to make it as good as he could. Hence the importance of the failure. From an ethical point of view it was a good book—constructed and written without haste, apart from any consideration of immediate financial success. This is confirmed externally as it were by Bennett himself who wrote in his *Journals* that he wanted it to be "a serious novel, a third to *Anna* and *Leonora*[9] (his best achievements so far)—that he "hoped it would be as good as the *Lys Rouge*[9]. So confident was he in the value of his work that he anticipated scandal and notoriety rather than failure. "Will the British public stand it?" he asked from the ever wise H. D. Davray, who however refused to be impressed either by the book or the possible danger to the susceptibilities of English

opinion. There is also internal evidence of the most disquieting nature as to what Bennett intended *Sacred and Profane Love* to be. To anyone who studies the plot closely it is obvious that the novel is merely a rough sketch of *The Old Wives Tale* which as we know was conceived years before Bennett made up his mind to compose it in its definite form. Carlotta, the Five Town girl of romantic tendencies, who wants to follow a career of experience and independence, and after finding her aunt dead as the result of her escapade with Diaz (precisely as Mr. Baines is found stifled in his bed) runs off to London, the Riviera, Paris, lives there in miserable lodgings and associates with prostitutes is nothing but a first version of Sophia Baines. Of course the plot is simpler, coarser and more melodramatic than that of the later masterpiece. There are violent deaths, pictures of gilded vice, trains de luxe, grand hotels as in his most sensational stories. The theme too is bolder: Carlotta does yield to the temptation, becomes Diaz' mistress and later has a very chequered career while Sophia preserves almost miraculous chastity. This might impress Bennett as the extreme of audacity, a breach of accepted literary conventions. But he is so conscious of his boldness, of his voluntary departures from decorum that a heavy Victorian atmosphere clings to his would-be novel of luxury and liberation: Carlotta drinks Chartreuse, but in a glass of smaller size, especially provided for ladies. After the sin she reflects that her conduct has been "unpardonable in a girl situated as I was", etc. Bennett's chief mistake seems to have been his method of narrative in the first person as if Carlotta herself told her adventure: thus he is tempted to write in a sentimental semi-hysterical style which he could

manage only too well, which he thought natural as from a woman of passion, and which is simply the perfection of vulgarity, insincerity and cheap pathos. He makes her say for instance: "I stretched out towards Diaz with the hands of my soul" or "he kissed me twice; the fire that consumes the world ran searching through me". The descriptive parts are weakest perhaps and most artificial. Sometimes they are directly reminiscent of Ouida and the conventionally "aristocratic" atmosphere of her novels: "In my drawing-room, far too full of bric-i-brac beneath the blaze of two Empire chandeliers which Viary had found for me in Chartres there were perhaps a dozen guests assembled". Sometimes the style is really like nothing on earth, an incongruous mixture of the most antagonistic phrases: "On the seaward terrace of the vast, pale, floriated Casino so impressive in its glittering vulgarity like the bride cake of a stock-broker's wedding we strolled about the multifarious crowd, immersed in ourselves." We now understand what Bennett meant when he said that, in his early novels, the sentences were apt to be "damnably mudiesque". The theme he treated (in spite of some melodramatic elements carefully eliminated from *The Old Wives' Tale* and also from the later *Lilian* which is not without some Hkeness to *Sacred and Profane Love)* was perhaps not worse than many others: it contained one good situation, which Bennett was to introduce more than once in his novels—that of the woman who is ready to "pay the price of love" and accept the imperfections of the man she has chosen (in this particular instance a man of genius). But it required to be treated with all the subtlety and superficial detachment of which only the greater Bennett was capable. The "damnably mudiesque

style" has destroyed all. The long and the short of it is that Bennett while really unmoved affected to write in the emotional style of a *grande amoureuse*. Hence the radical weakness of the book. This is so true that when a few years later (1911) Bennett decided to make a play out of the novel, although, as was always the case in such adaptations, he sweetened the plot and dropped some details which he found too crude, yet he greatly improved the story and turned a vile novel into a passable drama merely because he was then master of his style and had exchanged his florid intolerable sentences for a plain straightforward matter of fact dialogue. But, when all has been said, this narrative of 1905 makes instructive though distressing reading. It is good to know from what depths Bennett rose to the heights of consummate artistry.

The forty odd short stories which he accumulated in his three collections of Five Town Tales[1] can easily be distributed under the headings of either "farce" or "melodrama". It is true that they all have the "local" atmosphere in common—that this gives them a kind of unity and that they should be judged as descriptive of provincial custom and character, not merely on their merits as stories. No doubt some interesting colour, as we shall duly note later, may be gathered from some of them. But, it must be owned that the Staffordshire atmosphere is often highly unreal, and introduced merely for the sake of creating an artificial similarity of tone. This is particularly true of the section "Abroad" in the *Tales:* such stories as *The Hungarian Rhapsody* or *The Sisters Quita* would be of just as

[1]*Tales of the Five Towns,* 1905; *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns,* 1907; *The Matador of the Five Towns,* 1912.

much or as little interest if their heroes had not been born in the Five Towns.

Bennett himself described his stories as either "tabloid melodrama" or "slices of life". The melodramas are sometimes frankly cheap and unconvincing like *The Letter and the Lie* (a sentimental tale in the style of Barrie), *The Supreme Illusion, Nocturne at the Majestic,* etc., or more grimly realistic with a touch of Maupassant's Norman stories as in *A Letter Home* (Bennett's first tale published in 1893), *The Idiot, Mary with the High Hand, The Elixir of Youth,* etc. The "slices of life" are not very many if one understands thereby the detached description of real scenes unemotionally conveyed: perhaps *The Tight Hand* (a rough sketch of *Riceyman Steps)* and *The Cat and Cupid* which is reminiscent of Flaubert might best answer that description. But more often the objective realistic element is qualified by humour of varying kinds and degrees—with different results: *In a Netv Bottle* is a coarse joke of low quality, *Mr. Cowlishaw, Dentist,* a piece of foolish clownery, *The Baby's Tooth* an innocuous light story, *The Goose Driver* and *The Dog,* two good humorous pictures of local character. But in the three Vera stories, especially *The Murder of the Mandarin,* Bennett rises to high, even subtle comedy in which the fathomless stupidity of the beautiful Vera is very delicately suggested in a hundred ways, though never bluntly asserted. Lastly *The Death of Simon Fuge* and *The Matador* are neither farce nor melodrama but two perfect little masterpieces which probe the very depths of human nature. They will have to be considered separately.

After 1912 Bennett had no use for the Five Towns either

for Farce or Melodrama though they continued to serve as background to his serious realistic novels *(These Twain, The Roll Call)* as late as 1916. In his later collections of short stories hardly one or two tales have anything to do with Staffordshire. But, curiously enough Bennett returned to his old style in *The Strange Vanguard* (1928) which not only introduces in the person of Lord Furber a typical Five Town character, but also blends in one and the same narrative the methods of farce and melodrama which Bennett had so far more or less kept separate. In an atmosphere of cosmopolitan luxury (the novel was written in Rome in 1926 and most of the scene is laid in Italy) and of post war commercial competition, the plots and counter-plots of ruthless millionaires who would not even stop at murder (very much as in the old shockers) centre round a grotesque episode—a proposterous bet which shows the obstinacy of the Five Town population in general and of Lord Furber in particular. This comical episode which is the best thing in the book had been already turned to good account in *What I have said, I have said,* one of the short stories collected in *The Woman who Stole Everything* (1927). The picture of this Five Town magnate who at first objects to the notion, supported by his wife, of taking bus ninety-nine as a means of conveyance to Piccadilly and then, once he has assented, means to abide by his decision even when the awful fact is disclosed that this line is no longer running, is, let us admit, good fun. But the enlargement of the primitive short story and the superstructure added in the novel is of doubtful interest. It seems that Bennett—the Bennett of the years of exhaustion—endeavoured to return to his former Five Town vein by mixing the comic with the

tragic in order to give by means of this artificial blending the impression of creative originality.

The tales and novels which we have been passing under review exhibit shining merits and grave faults in varying degrees. Some of them, it has been pointed out, contain passages of real excellence and promise. But one defect they all have in common—their discontinuity. The episodes whether natural and commonplace as in *A Man from the North,* burlesque as in *A Great Man,* delightfully humorous as in *Buried Alive,* incredible and violent as in *The Grand Babylon,* form a broken series in which the connecting links are absent or lost in darkness. Hence a general impression of something unconvincing, unreal. Bennett, the great master of English realism, was not slow in realizing this. And he decided to give in *The Old Wives' Tale* something which, compared with his previous kaleidoscopic productions, would be like perfect cinematographic art—even perhaps cinematography in slow motion.

IV

CLASSICAL TRAGEDY: THE OLD WIVES' TALE

WHILE Bennett was grovelling in the sty of farce and sensationalism he never lost sight of the high aim which he felt confident he would one day fulfil and maintained his connection with art and serious literature by means of a few sedate, carefully written novels. Thus, in spite of his great failure *(Sacred and Profane Love),* we find that the way for *The Old Wives' Tale* had been prepared by three novels of real merit: *Anna of the Five Towns, Leonora, Whom God Hath Joined.*

Anna, published in 1902, had been begun (as *Sis Tellwright)* as early as 1897[1] and probably much rewritten. Bennett, who always showed some indulgence to *A Man from the North,* wrote of *Anna* with excessive severity on more than one occasion. "The last page of *Anna* would have sent me into a lunatic asylum if it had lasted five minutes longer".[2] And he quoted with some complacency the sarcasm of a contemporary reviewer according to whom it was "an entirely uninteresting tale about entirely uninteresting people".[3] H. G. Wells, though fairer to the book, was also critical when he neatly described it as "a photograph a little

[1]Letter to Sturt. 31 January 1897. *Catalogue,* p. 24.
[2]*Journals,* I, 1907.
[3]*Things that have Interested Me,* II, p. 220.

underdeveloped"I. It must be granted that it lacks vitality, often tends'to dullness complete and unrelieved. The style is heavy, even technical in the description of factories and local atmosphere, occasionally encumbered by explanatory foot-notes, a method which Bennett never used again. Another sign that this is a very early novel indeed is the introduction of dialect. A little later, in *The Truth about an Author,* Bennett was to write that in a provincial novel "dialect should be the merest indication" and not by any means realistic. This principle is very strictly adhered to in all his Five Town stories but the use of dialectal forms is in *Anna* something more than "the merest indication". The result is not fortunate and tends to make the dialogue still heavier. The sense of oppression and ennui which soon becomes so strong in the reader is further emphasized by the numerous descriptive passages. These are in themselves remarkable and stand out very well. Chief among them are descriptions of industrial scenery and of the clay factories. The latter are the more remarkable as they are exceptional in Bennett. In spite of the fact that pottery is the chief industry of Staffordshire it is highly significant that Bennett —save in *Anna*—has never described it at any length or made it the background of any of his novels. The truth is that he was chiefly attracted by the luxury trades—hotels, stores, theatres—and more interested in shops than in factories. But in *Anna,* Bennett, conscientious and inexperienced, carefully attempted description of the chief local industries and did it competently. Indeed these passages are very well written—concrete, colourful as well as accurate and conspicuous for condensed imagery. Some of these impressions

Catalogue, p. 39.

of the grim industrial scenery of the Five Towns are worthy of an anthology, and it is evident that much art and patient work has gone to their confection. Bennett is here probably nearer than anywhere else to the "ecriture artiste" of Flaubert and the Goncourts and *Anna* is a better example than *A Man from the North* of the influence of the French realists on Bennett. The trouble is that these descriptions nearly always read like digressions; they are external to the story and the art of blending them with the narrative, so obvious in the other, novels, had not yet been mastered by Bennett. The book has all the sluggishness and something of the atmosphere of a novel by George Eliot. It often reads like a literary guide to the Five Towns and the surrounding! country. At other times it has a didactic flavour. The criticism and implied condemnation of Wesleyanism as "a materialistic religion" is constant; the denunciation of paternal tyranny is even more systematic than in *The Way of All Flesh.* In 1897 Bennett wrote to Sturt that his book was above all "a sermon against parental authority". "A sermon". The word admirably describes the impression of painstaking heaviness which it creates in the reader. At the same time it has some genuine artistic merit: the description of the revivalist meeting is a masterpiece of realism and irony, with some fine satirical touches. The story is in itself touching in a simple way, and the compassion of Anna for the son of the bankrupt manufacturer Willie Price is a delicate touch which announces Christine of the *Pretty Lady* and her instinctive pity for the broken officer. The ending (the secret suicide of Willie with the £500 in his pocket) is contrived with admirable restraint and economy. It is characteristic of Bennett's methods as a playwright that this

effect—probably the finest thing in the book—was entirely spoiled in the stage-version of 1908 *(Cupid and Common Sense)* in order to secure a happy ending. But on the whole the novel is one of which Bennett should have been proud—a sincere and honest piece of.work, not without promises of future greatness—a good, if somewhat stodgy, study of provincial life. It would have won a literary prize in France.

The interest of *Leonora,* published in 1903, centres round the character after which the book is called and round it alone. There is considerable originality and real psychological insight in this picture of a middle-aged heroine who has reached what is according to Bennett the most romantic time of life. Her personality has developed fully, her beauty has mellowed and, as she is studied in her relation to her husband, John Stanway (a contemptible cad), and her three daughters, who are far inferior to her in intellect and charm, she comes out to best advantage as a heroine should. She is torn between a "futile desire for her lost youth" and a "morbid fear of approaching age" and here Bennett has already got hold of the central theme of *The Old Wives' Tale,* the particular tragedy of old age for a woman of beauty and wit. The tragedy is here all the more poignant as Leonora falls in love. But she does not cry or wring her hands as a young girl might; Bennett has endowed her, partly by nature but also partly as a result of experience, with calm optimism, benevolence, and perhaps just a touch of passivity which enables her to take the most serious events—dishonour, impending ruin, death, acute conflict with her daughters (here, curiously enough, Bennett sides with the parent against the children)—in a practical and supremely sensible manner. She is delightful, and Conrad

justly claimed that we saw too little of her, that "the pedestal was too great for the statue".[1] Indeed the pedestal is not only too great, but also unworthy of the statue: the Five Town characters (Aunt Hannah, Uncle Mehsach) are grossly overdone; the daughters (Ethel, the romantic; Rose, the intellectual; Millicent, the selfish minx) are superficially drawn and unconvincing. Bennett claimed that this was essentially a domestic novel, a picture of family life. But the *Scotsman,* in a contemporary review, had no difficulty in passing sentence on it from that point of view and pointed out that it was the "vulgar life of a smug prosperous home with meat teas". The interest of the book is psychological and lies in Bennett's analysis of feminine character. The "happy ending" with John's death and Leonora's marriage to Arthur which converts what might have been a sort of twentieth century *Princesse de Cleves* into a commonplace love story was justly deplored by Wells who concluded that "the clever Bennett would be terrible for Bennett the artist to elude".[2] Lastly the novel, which was probably composed far less leisurely than *Anna,* is very unevenly written. It is a sort of battlefield between bad style and style of real distinction. Bennett obviously had high hopes of this book and remembered in 1919 that "when composing *Leonora* at his hotel on the Quai Voltaire" he used to go out in the rue de RivoU "with the sensation as if the top of his head would come off".[8] The top of his head was to stand far more pressure and exertions before he finished *The Old Wives Tale.*

[1] *Catalogue,* p. 27.
[2] lb., p. 39.
[3] *Journals,* I, p. 308.

In *Anna* Bennett had got hold of an excellent plot closely connected with the Five Towns; in *Leonora* he had an original situation in which his psychological insight and knowledge of women could show to best advantage. Yet he only half-succeeded. He could not quite lift the one to the standard of vitality required for a masterpiece, and he made a mess of the plot for the other. With *Whom God Hath Joined* (1906) he started with a story that was far from promising; the two divorce cases (Fearns v. Fearns and Ridware v. Ridware) are connected in an artificial and unnecessary manner and the latter in spite of the power and pathos which its treatment implies would have been best omitted. Moreover there is a suspicion that these two parallel cases are brought together with a didactic purpose—that this is a novel "with a thesis", that, as Marks' oratorical remarks at the end would seem to prove, Bennett's underlying intention was to write a tract against divorce, or at least the publicity given to divorce cases in England—a subject, as we know, on which he felt warmly. Yet in spite of these obvious pitfalls he came very near achieving absolute greatness in this novel. For he had now acquired the detachment of a great realist and the mastery of a perfectly adequate style.

The first eighty pages are competent and powerful—no more. The story of the conjugal sorrows of Lawrence Ridware arouses interest which is moderate but very artistically divided between the outraged husband and the guilty wife. Then with the chapter entitled *Annunciata* the tone suddenly rises and the human interest increases a hundredfold. In the house of the successful lawyer, from which the wife is temporarily absent, the three characters of

Charlie Fearns, his daughter Annunciata and his mistress Renee Souchon, the French governess, are drawn with strange clearness and precision. Chiefly, the relation of the hard pure English maiden to the womanly insinuating Frenchwoman is mercilessly analysed and faultlessly conveyed. The setting for the tragedy is minutely prepared. And the climax—the discovery by Annunciata that Renee sleeps in her father's room—is described without undue emotion as it draws slowly nearer with the inevitability of fate. For imaginative insight and subtlety of analysis Bennett never surpassed these few pages. Moreover the craftsmanship, the patient elaboration of minute details of the plot, which had occasionally been foreshadowed in some of the earlier novels, is here revealed in its full power and succeeds in creating an atmosphere of reality, of intellectual acceptation on the part of the reader which is not a mere "suspension of disbelief" but an actual conviction. This is seen chiefly in the great court scene in the second half of the book. This climax had been prepared from the very first pages in which a chance sentence ("I suppose you won't keep living in a furnished house for ever?") contains the key to the central episode. Similarly the unimportant telegram sent by Mrs. Fearns to her husband is, many pages later, the indirect cause of the catastrophe as Annunciata watching her father through the half open door espies the fatal pat on the governess's cheek. This goes far towards proving, as Mr. Priestley insists, that Bennett worked his stories backwards, starting from the main event and tracking it to its most infinitesimal beginnings.

Lastly, though the style is here remarkably free from the emotional excesses and ornaments of *Sacred and Profane*

Love, a shade of half-repressed pathos occurs in some of the finest passages of the book—a sense of the tragedy of life—a mere shudder or quiver which shows that the author is not unmoved or absolutely impartial in face of the events he so detachedly records—a proof of that "lofty nobility of mind" which Bennett recognized as the highest quality of the novehst and of which despite appearances he was not altogether devoid. This is seen for instance in the scene of Renee's farewell to Charlie Fearns under the bridge when the sudden appearance of a horse hauling a barge along the canal secretly connects the tragi-comedy with the larger tragedy of life;[1] or the admirable conclusion to the discovery by Annunciata of her father's indignity:

> But now the supreme disaster had happened. The bomb had burst. A moment's indiscretion, a moment's folly at the top of a staircase, had nullified the amazing and elaborate ingenuity in deceit of a quarter of a century. Charles Fearns the tight-rope dancer had fallen, and crushed the tender and delicate creature whom alone he purely loved.[2]

By this combination of faultless realism, imperceptible emotion and perfect dignity of style the greatness of Arnold Bennett is fully revealed.

In the mind of him who reads *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) through, especially after the wild failures or depressing half-successes which preceded, a general impression remains afloat on the ocean of contradictory impressions created by the book: that of classical restraint. It is not perhaps easy to account for in detail but it seems inevitable. It may appear

[1]Chap. VI.
[2]Chap. III.

preposterous to liken the novel to "a classical tragedy", but it is undeniable that in this widely different province of the novel if exliibits some of the essential qualities of classical art. An early critic, F. J. H. Darton, praised in it "a height of passionless austerity". H. G. Wells writing immediately after publication found it "too big, too fine and too restrained"I for immediate recognition. Bennett himself wrote, describing his aspirations at the time when he sat down to his task, that he hoped he could do something effective "by sheer force of concentration and monotony". Moreover the principal models he had set himself at the time—either for form, or matter—Maupassant, Stendhal, George Moore, were all masters of the classical touch. On the other hand, Frank Harris, that inveterate romantic, was disappointed in the book and protested against the dull quiet ending which he wanted more flamboyant. Whatever its faults or occasional excesses, *The Old Wives' Tale* reveals an essentially classical method of art: realism qualified by selection or adaptation. Its elaborate though somewhat bulky architecture has at least something in common with the Parthenon of which the columns were built with slight obliquity so as to leave a perfectly straight image on the curved retina of the human eye.

Classical, romantic or merely realistic, Bennett at least was fully aware that in beginning *The Old Wives' Tale* in the autumn of 1907 he was attempting something big We know how the first thought of it had occurred to him as early as 1903 while witnessing a strange scene in a Paris restaurant.[2] "For several years I looked it squarely in the

[1]*Catalogue,* **p. 40.**
[2]**Preface.**

face at intervals and then walked away to write novels of smaller scope.... But I could not dally for ever___" For now he was overcome by a strange sense of fate, the feeling that the moment had come to strike the blow. "At this period, 1907, the story of *The Old Wives' Tale* lay in wait for me within my mind and was continually reminding me of its presence there; the idea moved within me in the way of liquids in the tanks of a rolling yacht".[1] He felt that the idea was "ripening", that "he was fecundating an epic". And he brought to his work a disinterested passion, a high fervour which was unexpected or at least unusual in one who had so long exulted in the pose of a professional writer. "I must introduce in the novel not merely sexual psychology but a lofty nobility such as I got sometimes in *Whom God Hath Joined."*

Another sign of Bennett's intense seriousness when he wrote the novel were the fears and doubts he entertained about its success. The date of publication, his wife tells us, he considered as "the most important day of his life". When he had concluded the last chapter he confessed that "he thought the book dull". He was "apprehensive about its fate" and had "no real hope of its success". These were not only the misgivings of a gambler who has staked his all on one stroke; but also a deep artistic conviction that the book which had been written without immediate thought of public taste or rapid success was really too good and could not be given proper recognition. Such, as we have seen, was also the opinion of H. G. Wells.

In most of Bennett's novels the story is told for its own sake. This convinced practiser of realistic technique would

[1]*Life and Letters,* **January 1929. Note to extracts from the** ***Journals.***

not allow his opinions to interfere with the straightforward narrative. It is only in his early books, and very occasionally, as in the tirade against divorce cases in *Whom God Hath Joined,* or the frequent unsympathetic presentment of parental tyranny, that one may detect an echo of his own private views. His most typical works *These Twain, The Pretty Lady, Riceyman Steps* are truly novels without a purpose. This was all the more natural and easy to achieve as Bennett had no very original message to deliver—as his essential genius served by a life-long habit of self-repression consisted precisely in ignoring his own feelings and observing those of others with the understanding that springs from perfect detachment. When writing his books he thought pre-eminently of his story and of his characters—as an artist. But it seems that in the case of *The Old Wives Tale* he started from a general idea—that he first conceived clearly the beauty and tragedy of a theme which he then proceeded to illustrate. This at least is the impression one derives from the *Preface* and it is not belied by a close study of the novel in which it recurs, directly or indirectly exposed, like a sort of burden. It is a sad, highly poetical theme—old and commonplace as a classical theme should be—precisely that treated in Villon's *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis* or more closely still in Baudelaire's *Petites Vieilles*—the decline and fall of feminine grace and beauty. "There is an extreme pathos" wrote Bennett in the *Preface* "in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her forms and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal

changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos."

> Corps femenin qui tant es tendre
> Poly, soef, si precieux,
> Te faudra-t-il ces maux attendre?
> Oy. . . .

had sung Villon. "Oy" echoed Bennett and he proceeded to record "ces maux", the "infinitesimal changes", with a patience and a relentless minuteness which, though never coarsely physical, is yet more cruel than the French poet's macabre realism. Unlike Thackeray's masterpiece, *The Old Wives' Tale* is not "a novel without a hero". It is, as was admirably said, "a novel with two suffering heroines and three conquering heroes: Time, Death and Mutability."

The classical touch is also felt in the subtle drawing of the chief characters: Sophia first, one of the best women characters ever created by Bennett; to begin with, romantic, mischievous and wayward—eager to escape her drab commercial surroundings—haughtily conscious of her beauty—sensuous, yearning for love, yearning for Paris and pretty clothes and all the luxury of the South. But after the death of her romantic illusions, all the "Teutonic astuteness" in her reveals itself, all her latent capacity for organization not unmixed with the terrible "thrift" ingrained in every Five Town heart—always strong, self-contained, stoical. And next, Constance, the original heroine of the story though of an obviously less heroic cast, provincial, courageous, decent, industrious with a weaker vein of sentiment and tenderness—the "mangy tabby cat" side by side with

"the superb wild animal" as Frank Harris puts it. Mrs. Baines who remains for the reader the mellow" matron of the first pages concealing beneath her kind majestic appearance and tactful behaviour an iron sense of her authority as a mother and of her social dignity. Mr. Povey who combines with the mind and body of a shop assistant the impulses of an apostle and a martyr. Gerald the unforgettable weakling. Cyril, self-centred, with the cruelty of youth. Miss Chetwynd, shabby, pretentious, pedantic, yet impressively refined. But in spite of the delicacy of the touch which reminds one of the eighteenth century masters —Richardson, Marivaux, Stendhal—those characters, with the possible exception of Sophia, are comparatively simple. In their essence there is nothing complex, little that is mysterious or abnormal. It is in the interplay of their feelings, in their reaction to each other that the subtlety comes in and that Bennett's admirable insight is revealed. The story of the conflict between mother and daughter over Sophia's future at the beginning of the book is masterly as also the relations between Gerald and Sophia, Samuel Povey and Constance, though the latter are not so elaborately treated. With a much lighter touch Bennett achieves effects as deep and far-reaching as Butler in *The Way of all Flesh.* The situation of Constance and her neglectful son, in which the influence of Maupassant's *Une Vie* is most clearly felt, is equally well rendered; and, as ever, Bennett's analysis of the relation between masters and servants is superb.

The amount of realistic observation which went to the making of *The Old Wives' Tale* is considerable. Of the draper's shop, Bennett possessed first-hand knowledge as

he had during part of his childhood lived with his grandparents who owned such a shop in St. John's Square, Burslem. A large number of details *in* the course of the narrative were copied from actual life.[1] Where he possessed no first-hand information Bennett had recourse to sources which were as close to life as was possible: conversations with the Leberts about the siege of Paris, press-cuttings or journalists' impressions as in the case of the shooting of the mad elephant at Burslem Wakes or the public execution at Auxerre; historical works and Memoirs for the events of 1870-1871.[2] The result is often impressive and convincing; here and there (though not everywhere) Bennett's style acquires the strength, nay the brutality of Maupassant's or the Goncourt's physical descriptions. A selection of striking passages could even be gathered (the death of John Baines, the funeral tea, Povey's tickets, the drunkenness of Daniel Povey's wife, the great execution scene, Sophia's gastric dizziness) which stamp him as a disciple of Balzac and Zola.

As often as not however, in the midst of his most deliberate attempts at realism, the style is strangely reticent and chastened. I have shown that, in the execution scene,[3] when he has made use of typical details from the articles of Georges de Labruyere, he has often weakened and toned

[1]The description of the excitement caused by the news of Eyraud's impending execution in the night restaurants is copied from similar scenes witnessed by Bennett in Paris at the time of the acquittal of Therese Humbert, as a glance at *Paris Nights* will show; Sophia's discovery of Gerald's unfaithfulness as he drives past her in a cab, was, I am informed, an actual experience in the life of one of Bennett's near relatives; the Dr. Stirling of the end of the novel had as its original a Dr. Russell who died in Scotland in 1926.

[2]See *Appendix,* p. 264.

[3]Ib.

them down. We here find the limits of Bennett's realism which though honest and conscientious is not by any means merciless or absolute. It has been often remarked that his Five Town scenes are far more convincing than the French episodes of his tale, and it must be admitted that little excuse can be found for his pictures of Parisian life. "Ses Francais sont vraiment peu flattes" complains Chevalley. Why should he have drawn such caricatures ? It is no use pleading, as Mr. Simons does, that Bennett was not a good painter of this sophisticated milieu because he himself was unsophisticated. We know by some admirable pages in *Paris Nights* and in the *Journals* that he had then penetrated French life and ways thoroughly well, liked them and described them excellently. The painful truth seems to be that he preferred giving his English public a picture of the French such as they would naturally expect, corresponding as it did to racial prejudice, rather than the more sober truth which he knew so well. Hence that incredible Madame Foucault who was good enough for *Sacred and Profane Love* but is here out of place; hence that theatrical though chivalrous Chirac who properly belongs to West-End popular farce or Drury Lane melodrama. The artificiality of these descriptions is best shown in the language spoken by such characters which is a literal translation of French idioms ("Is it that I know" etc.). In *The Pretty Lady* Bennett had once more recourse to the same trick with perhaps still more disastrous results. How methods of such vulgarity could recommend themselves to the artist and hater of convention that he was is inconceivable.

Is not the central character—Sophia—open to this, or a similar charge? Has not the admirable realistic material out

of which she was created been reduced both in quantity and quality by strange admixtures and mutilations? Chevalley remarks that, like a prim English virgin, "elle passe inconcevablement a cote des souillures". And Frank Harris vehemently[1] voiced his disappointment and explained that he "wanted her seduced, abandoned" and becoming gradually "the magnificent courtesan which you had at first intended". It must be owned that in the early stages Sophia was something very different. The novel was to have been "written cruelly" in the manner of *Ivan Ilytch*—Sophia was to have become "a whore and all that", like that "mysterious pretty Englishwoman from Liverpool who gave lessons in English to a constant stream of *messieurs chics"* mentioned in the *Journals.* She finally was meant to "sink in the world" and "end her days as companion of dogs in front of a dog-cart". And Bennett even added "what an outcry in the literary columns of the British Press!"I What happened then? Was the fearless realist afraid of the British Press? Was he afraid of his public? Did he choose to effect a compromise such as he recommended in *The Author's Craft?* Why does Gerald marry Sophia instead of jilting her? Why does she not become Chirac's mistress? And, is this, as Frank Harris complained, a case of high artistic treason? Rather perhaps, at least in part of high artistic scruple. After all to have made one sister virtuous and stay-at-home, the other "splendidly sinful" would have been the height of romantic symmetry. The natural trend of the story demanded that Sophia, deserted by her husband, bound by ties of gratitude, should become the mistress of Chirac—a man who was going to risk his life in a brave

[1]***Lije and Letters*, January 1929.**

undertaking. Even the British public would have forgiven her that momentary weakness with a bearded, temperamental Frenchman. But the stern realist in Bennett said no. The artist with supreme coquetry denied himself this facile effect. Not like an English virgin, but rather likef a Dostoevskian heroine, without reason or motives, Sophia was made to refuse Chirac's love and pursue lifer lonely road in unwarranted chastity. She had not even, like Gide's Alicia, the pretext of religious convictions. She was probably a victim of classical reticence and artistic austerity.

The plot is also fertile *in* possibilities. The eternal theme of youth's slow decay underlies it and occasionally uplifts it to heights of poetic emotion. Bennett was not however content with this, which the life of Constance would alone have sufficed to illustrate. By adding Sophia, by contrasting the personality of the two sisters, by suddenly separating their lives, making one dull and provincial, the other spectacular and Parisian, only to merge them together again till the end, thereby showing that romance, passion and adventure on the one hand, common sense and middle-class respectability on the other, are undistinguishable at the coming of age and death—thus has Bennett endowed his subject, which was merely cruelly pathetic, with a touch of sceptical irony not unworthy of the Anatole France of *Thais.* You may follow the traditions, carry on the trade of your ancestors in your native town by means of a marriage of convenience, or you may marry for love, ruin your reputation, arouse passion in the heart of a melodramatic Frenchman, associate with prostitutes, suffer the rigours of illness, cold and hunger in a besieged city—and then achieve

wealth and worldly success. What does it all matter, what difference does it make? You will both become old, stay-at-home women. Your efforts to escape provincial dullness and mediocrity will be in vain. The past will count as nothing. Wrinkles and illness will attenuate all differences and regulate idiosyncrasies.

> Je connais que pauvres et riches. . . .
> Sages et fols, pretres et lais,
> Nobles, villains, larges et chichcs,
> Dames a rebrassez collez
> De quelconque condicion. . . .
> Mort saisit sans exception.

However this defeat of youth and personality by time seemed too individual to Bennett and he considerably widened the range of his story by associating the growth, decline and fall of the two sisters with the passing of the old order of things and the coming of the new one. Sophia helps to bring it about and gives it as it were the first stroke in the conflict with her mother at the beginning of the book; with matchless art Bennett shows us how, by the mere refusal of a spoonful of castor oil, parental authority is challenged and, as early as 1863, Victorian Society rocks on its foundations. Then the old order suffers a new defeat in the marriage of Constance with a mere assistant—Samuel Povey. Mrs. Baines retires and dies. Meanwhile in Paris we get an interesting if restricted aspect of life in the French capital first in the last days of the empire, next during the revolution and the siege. But here Bennett emphasizes the uniformity and continuity of the life of the nation rather than its slow or sudden changes. In her conflict with her

son Constance is made a victim to the progress of that new order which she unconsciously helped to bring about. She is now in the camp of the old, and withstands all changes. The last scene of the poll for or against Federation is symbolical. The old municipal liberties are threatened by the new need of centralization. Constance stubbornly votes against the new law thus securing an ephemeral victory for the Old Order and incidentally killing herself by leaving her sick room. The circle has been run full length. With the death of the last of the two sisters one cycle of history closes and another begins. Alone old Critchlow marks the permanency of commercial instincts and the Five Towns will to live.

The danger of course was that by thus widening his story, by bringing in, even on a reduced scale, such enormous episodes as the siege of Paris and the Commune, Bennett risked overloading his novel, and making it erratic and amorphous. This danger he has not quite avoided. The dullness of *Anna* is here and there perceptible in the second and chiefly in the fourth book of the novel. This dullness is perhaps inherent to the narrative and does not detract from its classical character; but it could not be tolerated if there were not brighter passages. Sometimes also, in spite of all precautions, Sophia's adventures in Paris verge on the melodramatic and she perilously reminds us of the Carlotta Peel of *Sacred and Profane Love.* The style too is uneven. The novel was begun in the autumn of 1907 at Fontainebleau and the whole of the first book is written with great care, and yet with ease and unaffected humour. Such pages as the encounter between Miss Chetwynd and Mrs. Baines, which recall Thackeray or even Meredith, are unique in

the work of Bennett. In the second book which was written after an interruption of three months the tone is already different, colder, more detached. It rises to the heights of the epic in the description of the execution and the orgiastic night at Auxerre, then becomes strangely (perhaps purposely) restrained and even ineffectual during the siege and the events that follow. It never recaptures the warmth and geniality of the opening pages.

Is then *The Old Wives' Tale* nothing but a "formless Chronicle" as has been alleged? Was the adjunction of Sophia's life in Paris (an afterthought, as we know) a mistake? Does the narrative, at least occasionally, drift aimlessly as in a Dostoevskian novel? We know that a little later in order to secure its inclusion in the Tauchnitz series Bennett was forced to abridge the tale. Was this process artistically desirable and should we admit that there is in the book much that is unnecessary and adventitious? What becomes then of its artistic quality of the classical soundness of the work?

It is saved by the patient perfection of the technique—by the masterful grasp of details, the fitting of small facts into each other, the welding of incongruous elements into a whole. This technique is nowhere more apparent than in the first Book which in a few chapters lays upon two apparently insignificant events (Mr. Povey's tooth and the shooting of the elephant) the firm foundation of all the story. The casualness with which some details which will only much later prove important are introduced is admirable. No better instance could be found than the description of Mr. Povey hurrying to the dentist's and wilfully ignoring the doctor who brings him news that a son is born to his cousin

Daniel—an incident which contains the germ of Samuel Povey's own death. Sometimes even this dovetailing of chance circumstances is a little too carefully contrived, a little too complacently displayed as when Sophia, reflecting on her misfortunes, remarks "All this because mother and Constance wanted to see the elephant and 1 had to go into father's room! I should never have caught sight of [Gerald] from the drawing-room window". The well rubbed links of the chain of fate are made to sparkle somewhat artificially before our eyes.

All these imperfections however disappear owing to the manner in which Bennett creates the illusion of time. Here lies of course the originality of the book. In the Drama the great problem has been to give the impression that the development of the events represented would not take longer in real life than on the stage. Classical tragedy aims at this ideal coincidence or at least at creating a reasonable illusion that the stage-clock is not appreciably faster than a clock outside the theatre. The length of a novel however, the fact that it is not meant to be read through at one sitting, has led to a disregard of any such rules, as, for instance, in *David Copperfield* where the temporal discontinuity of the narrative is not concealed. On the other hand such modern novels as *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway,* concentrate on a very restricted period of time and devote hundreds of pages to its description. Bennett has struck a middle course: he gives us a full length biography of two characters, exactly forty-four years of human life, he confines himself to a length of 200,000 words or about 700 pages (less, as he remarks, than the average Victorian novel), and yet he refuses to admit any temporal discon-

tinuity in his narrative. He strains all his art to conceal and screen those inevitable gaps in the chain of incidents, and he amazingly succeeds. We are not aware that the minutes, the hours, the days relentlessly fly with every page, line, word of his narrative, that the tick of the clock is in the rhythm of each sentence. Constance and Sophia grow old without our being aware of it until an external event reveals the fact to them and to us. He thus achieves intensely moving scenes which probably no other novelist had attempted before: Mrs. Baines's departure from the shop at the end of Book 1; Sophia confronted with the body of her husband; Constance carrying her vote to the opposers of the Federation Scheme.

But how does Bennett do it? Mr. Desmond MacCarthy suggested with great subtlety that he made time "fly in Paris and crawl in the Five Towns." When we come to study the time of *The Old Wives' Tale* with care we find that this is not quite right. 173 pages only are devoted to Constance's life in Bursley, as against 181 to Sophia's adventures in Paris, during the thirty years that the sisters' separation lasted. True these pages are more evenly distributed in the case of Constance than *in* that of Sophia. But with this matter of distribution we are really at the root of the question. Let us once and for all establish the chronology of the novel. This is not quite so simple as it seems, for Bennett, though often referring to the passage of time, does so in a casual and indirect manner which leaves the reader uncertain as to whether three hours, three days or three years have elapsed since the preceding paragraph. One has to compare notes and check references, and even so, it is not certain that a definite result could be obtained if Con-

stance's letter to Sophia (IV, 1, 5) did not supply some important clues. Readers acquainted with the novel may be interested, perhaps surprised, to hear that Constance was born in 1847, Sophia in 1848; that the opening scene with the crowning incident of the extraction of Samuel Povey's tooth takes place in September 1863; the shooting of the elephant, with the events leading up to the death of John Baines, in September 1865; Sophia's elopement in June 1866; the execution at Auxerre in July of the same year and the final separation between Gerald and his wife in May 1870, after four years of gay life during which she presumably did her share in spending his fortune of £12,000. Constance's marriage to Povey had taken place early in 1867; Cyril was not born till 1874; old Mrs. Baines died in 1875; Samuel Povey in 1888; and in the following year (September 1889) Constance was callously turned out of her shop by Mr. Critchlow. The two sisters meet again in 1897 through the kind offices of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton and, after an unsuccessful attempt to move to another part of the world, settle definitely in Bursley in the early summer. Sophia dies at fifty-eight in 1906 and Constance at sixty in the autumn of 1907, at the very time when Bennett takes up the pen in Fontainbleau to write their story.

We have thus rudely torn to rags the close fabric with which the main pegs from which the story hangs had been so craftily concealed. But let us consider a little more minutely the rate at which the narrative proceeds. First, the masterly opening (Mr. Povey's tooth, Sophia's determination to become a teacher) requires no less than eighty pages and eleven sub-chapters for a period of only three

days. Here the passage of time is remarkably smooth: the first day slips along unperceived from afternoon till bedtime in the course of thirty-two pages; the second day passes a little more rapidly with twenty-nine pages only; then Bennett allows himself to skip on to the Sunday afternoon which is despatched in about ten pages. After this careful opening, there is a gap of two years and the narrative takes a big move forward, but soon it slackens again, advancing by steps of one day, three days or at most three months at a time, over a period of about eighteen months—when Sophia elopes. Then Bennett does not, as might have been expected, pass lightly on the marriage of Constance and the years that follow. He devotes over twenty pages to the months after Sophia's departure before he makes up his mind to let six years slip by. Similarly the first days of Sophia in Paris are described at length (over fifty pages) before he ventures to pass on to the separation four years later. Of course it may be said that Bennett has deliberately selected the episodes which he wishes to describe at length as being of special significance. It seems however that in many cases he has purposely diluted his story or introduced unnecessary details *merely to retard his narrative.*

His method is now obvious and artistically justified: we might compare him with an actor or dancer who wishes for a certain artistic reason to reach a particular point on the stage without being noticed by the public. Carefully, very slowly he takes three or four cautious steps forward and when the attention is directed elsewhere and the spectators think he does not move or is scarcely moving, he takes a big leap forward and instantly returns to his slow cautious method of advance. Or, if one may be permitted to ex-

change the metaphor for a coarser but plainer one, he begins, as one should, by pouring his oil drop by drop in the mayonnaise, but, once it is well set, like a master of the culinary art, he is not afraid of pouring three or four spoonfuls at a time and then waits until it has-all been absorbed.

The effect on the reader is certain. He is hoodwinked. As often as not he does not realize that the little sentence "some time later", "one day" etc., which in the preceding sentence covered but a few days now may stand for three or four years. Besides, he is not fully conscious of the cumulative value of these comparatively short periods. Thus does Bennett preserve the unity of time in his book. Thus are conveyed "the infinite number of infinitesimal changes" through which we age and die. Thus Time is made to move slowly, relentlessly "like a ship on the horizon". Thus does he achieve those grand unprecedented effects of surprise which stir the reader so deeply—when he suddenly realizes that Mrs. Baines is an old woman no longer wanted in her shop, or that Sophia is as worn and old as the dead body of her husband. "I shall never forget," writes Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, "the shock it was when I suddenly saw Constance slowly making her way up the hill, an elderly placid old body, her life practically over."

These are genuine triumphs of classical art.

V

AESCHYLEAN TRILOGY: CLAYHANGER

N*O* sooner had Bennett ascertained that *The Old Wives' Tale* was going to be a success than he decided to maintain, repeat and if possible intensify it. He was not of course the type of man who rests on his laurels. The book had been published in October 1908. By May 1909 he had conceived *Clayhanger* and was carrying out with method an extensive programme of preliminary reading. During the rest of the year he had digested Shaw's *Northern Potteries* and the anonymous *When I was a Child,* by "an old Potter", not to mention various books of Victorian history. He even went the length of compiling a list of all important social events between 1872 and 1887 so as to see if and how they could be brought into his narrative. Such research he had never before attempted and he was never to repeat. He was taking his part as provincial and realistic novelist seriously. He was determined to "go one better" on himself. His next book was to be a super-masterpiece. In *The Old Wives' Tale* he had used 700 pages to describe the lives of two sisters extending over sixty years. In the story of *Clayhanger* he would require 1300 pages for about twenty-five years of Edwin's existence.

The two books however cannot be compared. *The Old Wives' Tale,* as I have tried to show, has in spite of occasional

digressions something like classical unity. The book had been long in maturing, but the actual composition took place in a little less than a year. In the case of *Clayhanger* the publication of the full trilogy extended over six years (1910-1916). Though precise information on this point is lacking it is probable that it was first conceived as the story of Clayhanger's youth and marriage pure and simple—that the separate narrative of Hilda's life was an afterthought which occurred half-way through the first volume. As for *These Twain* we know that he delayed its composition for three or four years because, though he vaguely wanted to write a sequel to *Clayhanger,* he desired this sequel to be quite different from the rest, and did not know exactly what it would be like.[1] One last difference: in *The Old Wives Tale* as in Maupassant's *Une Vie* the narrative owes its general rhythm to the fact that we are given one or two human lives in their entirety from the end of childhood to the grave. In *Clayhanger* we are only presented with a fragment of a man's life.

At the same time, while never forgetting that the totality of this huge novel was not clearly conceived when it was begun, that, though exquisitely constructed in its details, it grew and expanded in a somewhat irregular manner, it seems desirable to consider it as an artistic whole and pass judgment on it as such. Of course a certain lack of unity will at once be apparent, but this duality is found already in the first volume and seems inherent to the nature of the work.

First, *The Clayhanger Trilogy* is a realistic novel with all the unmistakable stigmas of this school of art : grimly

[1] *Journals,* II, p. 87. August 31 1913.

truthful and accurate, objective and materialistic, provincial, physically descriptive, strongly autobiographical in some of its aspects, and mostly pessimistic in its general outlook. Secondly (chiefly in the last two volumes) it is a psychological novel describing with minute analysis the development and evolution of human love as exemplified in a particular couple. It might almost be termed a sentimental novel, if the treatment of the subject were not so unsentimental, so purely analytical and scientific.

Clayhanger comes pretty near to being the masterpiece of English realistic fiction. Bennett has never been more patient, more detached, more powerful *in* his style, more moving too through sheer dispassionate continuity of description than in this story of a man's youth in a lower middle class Staffordshire family of puritanical leanings. From the first the interest centres round Edwin. Bennett readily acknowledged that *"Clayhanger* /contains something of me as a boy". It is undeniable that this fine picture of a sensitive young man of artistic proclivities, attracted by architecture and water-colour painting, in acute contrast with his surroundings, yet painfully shy and wearing over these aesthetic tendencies a veneer of middle class respectability is a convincing piece of semi-autobiographical description and forms a happy correction to the distorted portraits of *The Card* or *A Man from the North.* However Edwin's character is not so much depicted in itself as in a continuous state of conflict with external inimical forces. First *in* conflict with the family circle in general and almost with every individual of it in particular. "They saw each other, not once a week, but at nearly every hour of every day, and they were surfeited of the companionship". For his

sisters Clara and Maggie, even for his aunt, the artifically emotional Mrs. Hamp, Edwin experienced nothing but fatigue or repulsion. Here Bennett is distinctly in advance of the literature of his time in which, except in abnormal cases, family life was still treated with a minimum of convention. It is however in the picture of Edwin's conflict with his father that Bennett surpasses himself for merciless realism and bitter intensity. All this episode is to a great extent autobiographical[1] and bears the stamp of impressive sincerity. With this novel it may be said that relations of deep irreconcilable hostility between father and son become legitimate, almost normal in literary psychology. The total lack of understanding and sentimental opacity on the part of Darius Clayhanger is so vividly rendered on the two occasions when he crushes his son's deepest aspirations by making impossible first his career as an architect, then his marriage, that the most unfilial reactions of Edwin become intelligible—even in the hour of revenge when he holds his enfeebled father at his mercy and exercises on him, though with moderation, the terrible right of getting his own back. Bennett had of course here a mighty predecessor in the author of *The Way of All Flesh*—that "ruthless book", as he calls it,[2] which he knew and admired so much. But though Bennett's irony is less sharp than Butler's and his satire less corrosive, the Clayhanger conflict is more grimly convincing than that of the Pontifexes, as Bennett has practically divorced it from religious implications. Darius Clayhanger is only superficially puritanical and (in spite of the fact that he compels his son to attend the Saturday

[1] *Journals*, I, p. 102.
[2] *Over There*, p. 23.

Bible Class) he is free from the hypocrisy of Ernest Pontifex's father. Moreover though Bennett is obviously inimical to the father and sides with Edwin against him, he has with admirable detachment refrained from overwhelming Darius as Butler does Theobald. In the grim pages describing Darius' childhood at the beginning of the book we are given (in a style which is in the pure literary lineage of Fielding and Dickens) a key to the psychology of the character. Darius is never a monster of vulgarity or selfishness; he is always true to himself, in the line of his own tradition. He cannot see or act otherwise. He is even kind and generous, as we are made to feel, in his own eyes. Here Bennett with an artistic touch which he never excelled placed side by side with the father as a further link with the inexplicable past from which they both emerge, the pathetic figure of Shushions. In his threefold relation to Shushions, himself and his son, Darius is three things at once: to his son, a cruel and unimaginative tyrant; to himself a paragon of thrift, industry and intelligence; to Shushions the wonderful quasi-miraculous outcome of his own charitable instincts. So pass the three generations—the grave whiskered Sunday school teacher who flourished in 1825, the thrifty headstrong printer who has risen from the workhouse to wealth, and the sensitive young *bourgeois* caught in the net of circumstances and parental tyranny, each with their own ambitions and ideals as unintelligible and incommunicable to the other as if they lived in different ages or on different continents. A sense of fate, of deep individual wrongs not proceeding from individual responsibility, weighs on the novel and deepens its gloom.

Edwin is not only inimical to his father; he is also at war

with all his surroundings and more particularly with an influence which has moulded those surroundings including the family atmosphere and his own mental and sentimental development far more than he realizes—with the Wesleyan religion. Here Bennett equals in virulent scorn even the most scathing pages of Butler. His references to the memorable prayer-gauge, to the temperance oath, to the monstrous Saturday afternoon Bible class are indignant and contemptuous. They have a clear autobiographical ring. "It was inevitable, he wrote elsewhere, that religion should come to be unalterably connected in my mind with ideas of boredom, injustice and insincerity!" This is precisely the effect which Wesleyan Methodism has on the mind of Edwin. The description of the debate on Bishop Colenso at the Wesleyan Society is already coldly sarcastic. But in the large fresco of the Centenary Procession (to commemorate the institution of Sunday schools) he reaches the limits of satire, and writes with a cruelty which can only be paralleled with that of Gautier or Flaubert when they hold up middle-class respectability to ridicule and loathing. Bennett could certainly manage a realistic description of a large crowd. In the execution scene at Auxerre the crowd though impressive and formidable is romantic in a horrible way owing to the long night and the lucid dawn, the impending catastrophe, the orgiastic and sadistic glow which heightens the scene. But here in the crude light of a June afternoon on the main square of Bursley the materialistic faith of the Five Towns is mercilessly exposed in the mere sight of the perspiring multitude. And when from the white-dressed children, one after another, interminably, "with a terrific volume of sound" rise the religious hymns, in which, instead of

phrases of tenderness and charity, the word "blood", symbolical of the cruel materialism of the creed, seems to recur at every line, Edwin can no longer refrain from the supreme sarcasm which falls like fire in the ears of the indignant Hilda: "It only wants the Ganges at the bottom of the Square." Here with cruel though perfect art Bennett introduces the burlesque scene of Mr. Shushions* altercation with the policeman and the country louts. Shushions is described as "Time's obscene victim", with almost cynical violence. But suddenly the tone rises as Edwin recognizes vaguely the old man whose existence he had almost forgotten. The chain of circumstance craftily forged and craftily concealed by the novelist is revealed in a flash to the reader and the scene closes in the grand style. One is reminded of the famous Catherine Leroux page in *Madame Bovary.* In such passages, cleverly introduced and faultlessly written, Bennett fulfils his youthful ambitions. He stands nearer Gustave Flaubert than any other English novelist.

Edwin is at war with his physical as well as with his moral surroundings—with the ugliness of the industrial district, with the dull narrowness of provincial life over which brood religious intolerance and parental tyranny. It is in *The Clayhanger Trilogy,* more particularly in some pages of the last chapters of *These Twain* that are found perhaps the most bitter and outspoken words which Bennett ever wrote about the Five Towns:

> The vast mediocre respectability of the district weighed on his heart.... You might walk from one end of the Five Towns to the other and not see one object that gave a thrill.... And when you went inside the houses you were no better off—you were even worse off, because you came at once into contact

> with an ignoble race of slatternly, imprisoned serfs driven by narrow-minded women who themselves were serfs with the mentality of serfs and the prodigious conceit of virtue.[1]

Neither Zola nor Huysmans nor Maupassant could improve on this. It is grim, uncompromising realism in its extreme form.

Lastly Edwin is at war with himself. Naturally sensuous and highly sensitive to the appeal of beauty, it so happens that avarice, parental tyranny, puritanical repression, the physical ugliness of his surroundings have disqualified him for the enjoyment of artistic pleasure. All exhibition of sentiment is painful to him. He is discouraged and baffled by sexual love as revealed in the powerful personality of Hilda, His shyness, his respectability which is but another form of repression, his weakness and indecision prove that he is self-divided. We are reminded of Sophia's first impressions when confronted with the frank sensuality of Parisian life. Bennett has analysed with great, probably with autobiographical subtlety the first awakening of sensuous pleasure in a soul long starved of beauty. The clog-dancing scene at the Dragon is justly famous and has already been singled out by critics for future anthologies. But its unique value is due to the fact that it is written from the point of view of Edwin, that each detail is calculated to awaken endless eddies of passion and desire in the soul of the susceptible young man. When he falls in love with Hilda he unaccountably thinks of Florence and her clog-dancing.

We are thus led to the sexual or sentimental aspect of the novel. *Clayhanger* was started by Bennett as a grim piece of

[1] *These Twain*, I, Chap. VIII, p. 959-

autobiographical narrative, realistic and uncompromising. And he succeeded in the first part of his book in giving us a full picture of Five Town life, with the conflict between the different generations, its religious and municipal aspects, and, in the background, the evolution of industrial conditions, from the primitive stage of clay moulding to steam printing and central heating, which is perhaps more restricted but also more precise than in *The Old Wives' Tale*. But he soon tired (January 1910) of these "human documents", of the purely social and provincial background of his novel. He tried, in his own words, to "lift" *Clayhanger*. His interest ceased to be purely descriptive and became more psychological. He introduced and developed the character of Hilda.

"We now approach the more picturesque part of Edwin's career," wrote Bennett at the beginning of the second book of *Clayhanger*. The sentence further tends to show that the author turned with relief from the grim first part of his story to the psychological side. Even to the critic, who is bound to recognize that the greatness of the book chiefly rests on these externally realistic elements *in* which the power of the novelist is best revealed, the treatment of the love story is sufficiently arresting and original to warrant a careful study. Bennett's psychological observation may not be of the highest order; but it is patient, minute and admirably unbiassed; it may be superficial, but, on the surface, it is exhaustive.

The love story as every one remembers is briefly this: at the age of twenty-three, in 1880, Edwin first meets, in the house of his friends the Orgreaves, Hilda Lessways, a girl slightly older than himself, apparently alone in the world

but possessing small independent means; he is at first repelled by her abrupt manners and unfeminihe bearing, but, in the course of two unexpected meetings, is much struck and attracted by her intelligence and powerful personality; a year later during another visit paid by Hilda to the Orgreaves they become secretly engaged and exchange a few love letters, until Edwin is thunderstruck by the news, conveyed through Janet Orgreaves, that Hilda has married George Cannon at Brighton. Ten years after, following upon the arrival of a mysterious "nephew", Master George, at the house of Janet, Edwin is given to understand that Hilda finds herself in grave difficulties as landlady of a boarding-house in Brighton. He goes and finds her, and saves her from destitution by means of a gift of money which is promptly refunded. Less than a year later Hilda is drawn to Bursley by her son's grave illness; in the course of that visit she discloses to Edwin that her husband is in jail for bigamy and other offences, that her marriage is not valid, and that her child is illegitimate. Edwin, while fully aware of the social difficulties which he will have to overcome, makes up his mind to marry her.

In the course of this long narrative Edwin's character is revealed more minutely and delicately than before. He is the same quiet young man, intensely serious, romantic, sensuous though unconscious of it, strongly attracted to all forms of beauty. One feature is however brought out with special vividness and admirable realism: extreme timidity, diffidence, almost morbid shyness, the result of repression, antagonistic surroundings and solitude. This strain is particularly apparent when he awakens to sentimental and

sexual life. Up to the age of twenty-three his chief experience seems to have been the memorable exhibition pf clog-dancing given by Florence at the Dragon. He "cannar talk to girls", he is afraid of Janet Orgreaves when she enters the shop with the express purpose of speaking to him; he stands diffidently on one leg during the conversation. The perplexities and contradictions into which he is thrown by his relations first with Janet, then with Hilda are described with true subtlety. The chief result is indecision—uncertainty of the most complete kind, as he does not himself know what he wants or what he feels. He at once wishes to go out of his office and meet Janet in the shop, and to remain concealed from the visitor; he cannot bring himself to accept the Orgreaves' invitation though he is dying to go; once he is in their house, he wants to stay and yet feels that he cannot; a little later he finds that, at the same moment, he experiences love and hate for Hilda. Never have the contradictions and most complicated impulses of a youthful soul at war with itself been more accurately or cleverly described. It follows that in Edwin's heart sudden changes, violent upheavals take place and transform his sentimental life. Two or three different beings seem to alternate in him and the reader is disconcerted by the violence and the unexpectedness of these modifications. Yet it is here that Bennett is most human, most convincing. When we compare these analyses with the melodramatic rodomontades of *Sacred and Profane Love* we realize Bennett's progress and the full difference between truth and convention. At first Edwin finds Hilda, about whom he has heard so much, rude and ugly, but a moment later is startled and attracted by her voice. His dislike of her, physical and

mental, is however maintained until suddenly he discovers that she is beautiful.

He was in love. Love had caught him and had affected his visioll so that he no longer saw any phenomenon as it actually was; neither himself nor Hilda, nor the circumstances which were uniting them. He could not follow a train of thought. He could not remain of one opinion nor of one mind. Within himself he was perpetually discussing Hilda and her attitude. She was marvellous! But was she? She admired him; but did she?... The processes of love were at work within him. Silently and magically, by the force of desire and of pride, the refracting glass was being specially ground which would enable him, which would compel him to see an ideal Hilda when he gazed at the real Hilda. He would not see the real Hilda any more unless some cataclysm should shatter the glass....

This is far-reaching and rings true. It explains the whole mechanism of the novel as far as the feelings of the main characters are concerned. It explains a great deal more as it supplies a key to Bennett's psychology throughout his novels. For one of his main titles to originality as a psychological novelist is precisely these sudden contradictory feelings which come over his heroes and chiefly heroines in successions of amazing rapidity, so that they even seem imaccountably to co-exist in the characters' minds and hearts: Hilda's love for Edwin and her marriage to George Cannon, Edwin's feelings of mingled irritation, love and hate for Hilda, Rachel's relation to her husband Louis in *The Price of Love,* etc., Bennett was first to proclaim in his novels that, especially among blood-relations, hate, contempt or indifference were not only very common feelings, but that their temporary existence was not incompatible

with a permanent substratum of genuine affection and esteem. A mother may see her son as he really is and yet love him; a wife may disapprove of her husband, discover his callousness or even dishonesty and yet her attachment to him remain unimpaired, and the old feelings return immediately or even preposterously coincide with the new ones. In this the novels of Bennett reveal depth and originality, a kinship with the principles of the modern school of literature which is remarkable. But is it all so new? And is not Bennett's merit in this domain, not exactly diminished, but at least explained by the fact that he was merely adapting and applying with admirable intelligence the methods of a predecessor in whom, with unfailing instinct, he had recognized one of the greatest masters of the novelist's craft. When he first discovered Stendhal we can only conjecture. But in 1907-1908 he was reading some of his lesser works while composing *The Old Wives' Tale,* which implies a probable knowledge of the greater masterpieces. How can we doubt it, when, as early as 1904, we find in *A Great Man* the following paragraph?

> Geraldine intended to be sisterly but succeeded only in being resentful and thus precipitated too soon the second stage of the entanglement, the stage in which a man after seeing everything in a woman, sees nothing in her; this second stage is usually of the briefest, but circumstances may render it permanent.

To any one familiar with Stendhal this passage bears the stamp of unmistakable influence—indeed of mere paraphrasing. And when we compare it with the lines from *Clayhanger* which we have been quoting before, the motives and sentiments of Bennett's characters are seen in a new light

and made more intelligible. Had not Bennett openly entered in his journal for March 1910 that he was rereading *De l'Amour* in order to "get ideas for the Clayhanger story"? Is it possible to believe that when writing this book and many others as well he had not present in his mind Stendhal's memorable page:

> Laissez travailler la tete d'un amant pendant vingt-quatre heures, et voici ce que vous trouverez: aux mines de fer de Saltzbourg, on jette, dans les profondeurs abandonnees de la mine, un rameau d'arbre effeuille par l'hiver; deux ou trois mois apres, on le retire couvert de cristallisations brillantes: les plus petites branches, celles qui ne sont pas plus grosses que la patte d'une mesange, sont garnies d'une infinite de diamants, mobiles et eblouissants; on ne peut plus reconnaitre le rameau primitif.... Ce que j'appelle cristallisation, c'est l'operation de l'esprit qui tire de tout ce qui se presente la decouverte que Tobjet aime a de nouvelles perfections.

The way in which love is born in the hearts of many of Bennett's heroes is the result of a sudden "crystallization" after many days of contradictory feelings. But, as Stendhal duly points out and as Edwin and Hilda shiningly illustrate, the "crystallization" is not permanent. It disappears and reappears with disconcerting sentimental fluctuations. Stendhal has noted the stages with mathematical accuracy:

> 1. *V*Admiration; 2. On se dit quel plaisir de lui donner des baisers, d'en recevoir, etc.; 3. L'esperance; 4. *V*Amour est ne; 5. La premiere cristallisation commence. . .; *6.* Le doute nait; 7. Seconde cristallisation.

And Stendhal warns us that these stages may be separated by months or may follow each other almost immediately.

In the light of this searching analysis the characters of Bennett lose much of their apparent contradiction and perversity. Indeed they now seem to adhere strictly to a pre-established order. First, Edwin admires Hilda while aware of her imperfections. And then one day the chemical process suddenly sets in "In fact he could persuade himself now that she was beautiful and even nobly beautiful. From one extreme he flew to the other." But even in the midst of this transformation his critical sense, still alert, raises the very objections of which Stendhal's psychology so admirably disposes: "The recollection of his original antipathy to Hilda troubles him. She was the same girl.... She was the same girl who had been so unpleasant, so sharp, so rudely disconcerting in her behaviour and he dared not say that she had altered. And yet now he could not get her out of his head. And although he would not admit that he constantly admired her, he did admit that there were moments when he admired her passionately and deemed her unique and above all women. Whence the change in himself? How to justify it? The problem was insoluble". Not so if Edwin had read Stendhal..

In fact these two characters, and many others in the novels, undergo a series of more or less complete "crystallizations" followed by stages of interruption or even by the contrary process. This is clearly seen in the case of Hilda who on first seeing Edwin's silhouette standing out on the bright background of his lighted shop, thinks that she would like to be his wife and is later deeply moved by his opinions on religion; and yet when she sees him at the Centenary celebrations is repeatedly disappointed with him and sees him in a different light. Thus a great many of the contra-

dictions of her character disappear if we remember that her creator was in constant intellectual communion with the author of *De VAmour*.

A great many but not all. For Hilda is essentially mysterious and in her Bennett has not merely manufactured a psychological automaton moved by Stendhahan reactions; he has created a strong, powerful personality, the most striking feminine character *in* all his novels. Disconcerting she is no doubt, especially to such as Edwin, abounding in conflicting and deceptive attributes: she seems ugly with her dark skin, thick eyebrows and continual frown; she has no sense of dress; she is rude, harsh, unpleasantly direct in her questions and judgments; unfeminine perhaps. But all these faults are merged in the charm of that mysterious quality which is essential to her. Weird, incalculable and, to the sentimentally impotent Edwin, intensely exciting, this is the final impression which she leaves. She has unexpected gestures or attitudes of infinite beauty and poetry: her presence in Edwin's garden, her kindness to Shushions, her first love letter. In fact she suddenly and admirably acts "in the grand style" to quote her admirer, Charles Orgreave—there are mysterious reactions in her that even the enigmatic conduct of Mathilde de la Mole to Julien Sorel will never suffice to explain. There is something Dostoevskian about her. She is a true Russian heroine like Grouschegnka or Nastasia Philipovna and she has for men the same morbid attraction, the same poetic atmosphere around her every mood.

This is precisely why it was perhaps a mistake on the part of Bennett to write *Hilda Lessways*. Of course the merit and originality of the attempt are not to be underestimated.

Bennett wanted to rewrite the whole story from the woman's point of view. He was persuaded that the masculine and the feminine vision of things were as entirely different as that of a horse or butterfly and that of a human being—that.this simple fact accounted for many misunderstandings and tragedies of married life. A few years later he gave, in a much lighter vein but also perhaps with more clearness, another example of this view in *Our Women:* a quarrel between husband and wife originates in a petty question of gardener and chrysanthema and degenerates into something serious; by clearly defining the man's, then the woman's side Bennett attempts to explain how this conflict has developed, through a series of minor misunderstandings, from absolutely nothing. The merest suspicion as to the actual nature of each other's feelings would have been enough to stop the quarrel.

In *Hilda Lessways* Bennett, in a more serious tone and on a more elaborate scale, attempted precisely the same thing. The garden- and the Centenary episodes and the kiss are now presented from a different point of view, filmed from another angle of the studio. We pass behind the scenes and behold the props and engines which unrolled to the bewildered eyes of the male a perplexing performance. It is all admirably done; it implies fine technique, patience and power of construction. The inevitable impression of monotony and repetition is reduced to a minimum. Of course there are other things in *Hilda Lessways:* an interesting account of the girl's childhood, a good though painful description of life in a second-class boarding-house at Brighton, etc. And the novel supplies welcome additions to our knowledge of the most interesting characters in

Clayhanger: Darius, described by Hilda as a fat old man looking as shy as his own son; Edwin, with his sad romantic face, etc. It even supplies a memorable description of the feelings of Hilda when George confesses the story of his first marriage: the unfathomable creature, instead of shame and hate, experiences compassion for the bigamist and even pride in his power of attraction! But, when all has been said and done, this novel has the great drawback of offering an explanation for the dark sides of Hilda's character, of supplying motives for her most wanton acts. Aesthetically, this is a mistake. It may be that some sort of account was needed. It might have been given, or suggested, in a final chapter. But to account minutely and logically for Hilda's every change of mood during her stay at the Orgreaves, to explain too clearly why she jilts Edwin immediately after accepting him, that is to convert the Russian character into a Cornelian heroine—the Dostoevskian novelist into a second-rate Meredith. *Clayhanger* would be a greater novel had *Hilda Lessways* never been written. If, as Bennett admirably puts it, Hilda had "unfathomable obscure grottoes in her soul", why proceed to flood these grottoes with crude light? why indeed reduce and annihilate the gloom which surrounds that powerful mystical personality? It is true that (as in the famous bigamy scene) she preserves a minimum of mystery. But only a minimum.

Be this as it may *Clayhanger* remains an extraordinary novel which, if it had more emotion and unity, would certainly be called a masterpiece. It has a unique flavour. The cruelly realistic style, the industrial descriptions, the autobiographical, the regional, the familiar, the religious are mingled in it with a strong psychological bias and a

touch of Russian atmosphere. It seems as though one were reading a novel to which Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Stendhal and Dostoevsky had contributed.

Yet this mere enumeration shows the limits as well as the extent of the novelist's originality. It is probable that in *These Twain,* which is perhaps inferior in execution, Bennett attempted something comparatively new and on far more independent lines. He had doubtless always wanted to write an autobiographical story of his own youth with inevitable sentimental episodes. But the determination to carry the narrative beyond the normal denouement—marriage, which is sentimental death—was just as striking and unexpected as continuing the history of Sophia and Constance beyond the seasons of youth, love and maturity to old age and physical death. To write the epic of married life, especially in a bourgeois family, was a task which had never been properly undertaken before, and has not perhaps been since. It required courage to launch on the enterprise and Bennett hesitated a long time before starting. "*Clayhanger* III must be quite different from *Clayhanger* and *Hilda.* I want to write more directly autobiographical work."[1] But he was attracted by the very difficulties of the theme—the lack of startling events which suited his patient quiet method of work—and he was drawing on his personal experience. He was indeed remarkably fitted for the task, with his detachment, his gift for minute observation, his insight into the reactions of different characters to each other, his realization of the difference of outlook between the sexes, his power to endow the unromantic with romance, his recent experience as a married man. His

[1] *Journals,* II, 31 August 1913.

friend Atkins claimed that every episode of the book "was true of every husband and wife".[1] If so, *These Twain* is a very great, a very original book indeed. But is it true?

It must be admitted that Bennett did not shy at the difficulty and honestly attacked the centra] theme. With the possible exception of the second book in which the after all exceptional and external element of jealousy is introduced with all the romantic associations which cling to Hilda's dubious past, he has bravely attempted to trace the evolution of feeling between husband and wife in normal circumstances and ordinary surroundings—he has confined his attention to the natural growth and modification undergone by the strongest of human affections when submitted in the course of four years of married life to the test of time and constant intercourse. With almost Proustian minuteness we are given, on the night of the first At Home offered by the Clayhangers to their friends, the temperature of Edwin's love: his deep feeling is qualified by resentment of Hilda's independent moods, her constant unpunctuality, her lack of taste in matters of dress and decoration. Meanwhile as Edwin waits for the first guests in the hall and his thoughts alternately move with equal satisfaction from the radiator which he has had installed (a rare luxury in those days!) to a large valuable reproduction of Bellini's "Agony in the Garden" on the wall, we understand how hard cores of bourgeois instincts are embedded in the finer substance of his nature and how these must grate on Hilda's sensibility. The friction between husband and wife soon develops over a series of small incidents—all admirably selected: first Hilda's hal£<:oncealed opposition (with a woman's dislike

[1] *Journak*, II, p. 154.

of the business part of a man's life and her fear of anything like risk) to Edwin's scheme for building new and larger works at Shawport; next her desire, prematurely and indiscreetly announced, to buy the family house from her husband's sisfer Maggie; then her conflict with his trusted adviser and foreman Big James (a fresh incarnation for her of the spirit of business) over the matter of the printing of programmes for her musical Sunday evenings; the arrangement of furniture in the dining-room on those important occasions, etc. The domestic warfare or guerilla, as Bennett terms it, is interrupted by the unconvincing and altogether unfortunate episode of George Cannon's innocence and release from prison in the Second Book, which has however the advantage of conferring on Edwin, in Hilda's eyes, a fresh superiority based on moral elevation and financial competence. But soon war breaks out again over the question of purchasing a country residence and of Edwin's standing for municipal election; the servants problem as is natural plays an important part in the final crisis which terminates in Edwin's voluntary surrender. The book ends in the spring of 1897 with a party (as it had begun in the August of 1892) in which the husband gives his wife the news that he has sold their town residence thus securing conjugal peace at the expense of business sense and masculine pride.

From the mere enumeration of events, from their ordinary mediocre character which may even, in a summary, appear slightly comical, it will be seen that Bennett has had recourse to no adventitious source of interest such as adultery or financial ruin which would have taken him away from the central theme. It is psychological comedy not unlike that of Emile Augier or even perhaps Marivaux but treated with

obvious earnestness and sincerity. Two chief objections might be raised to the attempt: first that Hilda is too exceptional and mysterious a being to make the analysis of conjugal relations convincing and valuable; by choosing as one of the partners such an incalculable irrational creature Bennett may have facilitated the course of incidents in his plot, but he has weakened the human value of his picture. Secondly, we really do not understand why Hilda and Edwin continue to live together. Incompatibility between them we do see indeed, and it is suggested in a variety of ways with admirable power or subtlety, but what keeps them together is not by any means so clear, unless it be, on the part of Edwin, a semi-masochist feeling as he delights to be crossed, perplexed and irritated by the uncontrollable temper of a woman ("What a romance she has made of my life!"); on the part of Hilda, the realization of her power over her husband and a need of protection and financial security. Which would perhaps induce a third objection of a more serious kind: the lack of fundamental nobility and disinterestedness in Bennett's characters. What are the lessons to be derived from this patient study of married life, the great psychological truths the novelist has arrived at? "It is each for himself in marriage after all and I have got my own way" (Hilda). Women dislike risk and business. They are selfish snobs and make intellectual honesty impossible, but they render life romantic and exciting. If you want to succeed as a husband, you must be prepared to accept injustice (Edwin). It is neither very new nor very pleasant. It is not very convincing either.

Reserving those important points, the novel contains

admirable descriptions and analysis of feeling: the slow progress of domestic antagonism is traced with amazing patience and fine understanding. Here again (but applied to a new field) appears Bennett's most original method—his use of psychological discontinuity. Edwin and Hilda's differences are not shown as reaching a climax through a long series of more and more serious misunderstandings; each conflict ends in a reconciliation. The word reconciliation is however quite inaccurate, as there is no concession on either part, no admission of reciprocal wrongs. But the most violent differences or even quarrels are followed by displays of mutual affection, at which they are themselves disconcerted, but which testify to the survival of sexual love, or rather to its illogical subconscious origin, utterly divorced from similarity of taste or opinion. Each development in the conjugal estrangement is thus punctuated by a kiss (there are at least five such scenes in the novel) which Edwin is utterly at a loss to understand or justify. "The heat of their kisses had not cooled; but to him at any rate the kisses often seemed intensely illogical; for, though he regarded himself as an improving expert in the science of life, he had not yet begun to perceive that those kisses were the only true logic of their joint career."[1]

For after all the realistic novel, through psychological detours, ends in a romantic close: the triumph of love, though it is love between husband and wife, and love of a not altogether disinterested kind. There is something romantic also, something epic, it must be owned, in that long walk that Edwin, in the last pages of the novel, takes at night to Bursley and Hillport, having left Hilda, as he

[1] *These Twain,* II, Chap. XII, p. i.

thinks, for the last time, full of grievances and at last determined to bear no more. There *is* a surprising intensity in this picture of the long-suffering husband's exasperation, his "terrific indictment" of his wife, his wild dreams of liberty regained. No more stormy feelings c#n have raged in the heart of Lear while he paced the moor in the rain. But as in Shakespeare, or rather as in the great Aeschylean trilogy, peace and a reconciliation of conflicting forces set in at last. As he reaches the canal bridge—the very spot where the novel had begun 1200 pages earHer—a sense of peace and atonement comes over him while a great discovery (great though "banal, commonplace; it was what everyone knew") "flashed into his mind"—namely that "to reconcile oneself to injustice was the master achievement". Thus, on a very prosaic plane, the novel repeats the wisdom of the Greek dramatic poets and catches something of their antiphonic rhythm. As Orestes in the Athenian Temple, the chief printer of Bursley finds refuge and remission on the canal bridge and the weight of disaster and separation is lifted like a curse from his shoulders. After the man's side, and the woman's side, we have had with a few final convulsions the reconciliation of the two extremes in a final compromise. Bennett has done his best to "lift" *Clayhanger* to a higher plane of emotion and interest. He has not failed altogether.

But who has heard of a quadrilogy ? *The Roll Call* (1919) which narrates the adventures of George Edwin Cannon, as architect in London is a very inferior piece of work. In fact it has no more connection with the trilogy than George Cannon himself has any blood relation to Edwin, although it is pleasant to get a glimpse (a mere glimpse) of the latter

towards the end of the book as a middle-aged alderman, and of his wife. In order to narrate the (totally undistinguished) sentimental adventures of the young architect, Bennett seems to have gone back to the atmosphere and characters of his early Chelsea novels, and his hesitations between the womanly Marguerite and the enigmatic Lois are reminiscent of the buridanesque hesitations of the hero of *A Great Man* and *A Man from the North*. At the same time there is a good deal of resemblance between the two heroines and those of the immediately preceding novels—Janet Orgreaves and Hilda Lessways. All this points to an undeniable exhaustion of the creative faculty, a typical method of Bennett being then to revive some of his oldest situations and characters and to combine with them weak duplicate copies from his most recent successes. However, if the brain shows sign of fatigue, the hand does not. The style is as clear and alert as ever, the power of observation unimpaired. There is in the book a two-page description of George ordering a cup of coffee at a Lyons' shop which for sheer vividity of rendering excels anything he had written so far; and the impressions of early war-life in London at the end are wonderfully fresh and complete. In that respect the novel, which was written before *The Pretty Lady*, has the additional interest of supplying a transition between Bennett's regional work and his later novels in which the Five Towns hardly ever appear. It helps to show how the war diverted his interests and activities into other channels and cut him loose from these provincial influences which had so long weighed on his work.

The Price of Love (published 1914) belongs to a distinctly earlier period: it first appeared serially in *Harper' s Magazine*

towards the end of 1912. It is an original and powerful story with strong local atmosphere. It stands midway between the lighter Five Town stories such as for instance *Helen with the High Hand* and the stern *Clayhanger* trilogy. The plot is more varied, less stagnant than in the latter and the (slightly improbable) ingenuity with which the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Maldon's money is contrived reminds us of the early shockers, though it is much less crude and quite worthy of a first class detective novel. However the real value of the book lies in the skilful contrast between the three chief characters: Julian the grim hard-working man of ambition, who, for all his provincial bluntness, is just as dishonest as his cousin Louis, the charming self-indulgent weakling; and Rachel, the real hero of the book, and the only attractive figure, with her mysterious flashes of feminity and her manly acceptance of realities. The psychology of the novel is closely connected with that of the three *Clayhanger* stories. The somewhat enigmatic personality of Rachel, with "revelations of the Odalisque in her" recalls that of Hilda though endowed with more womanly charm. But it is chiefly her relation to her husband Louis, her cool realization of his faults and worst weaknesses ("she saw him objectively as a god might have seen him") which does not destroy or even materially affect her feeling for him, her stoical admission that "married life is a fight" and that a woman should expect to "pay the price of love" which stamp the book as belonging to the same cycle as *Hilda Lessways* and *These Twain*. For it was at this time that, thanks partly to Stendhal, partly to Dostoevsky, and also to his own observation and experience, Bennett became fully aware of the intermittence and contradiction of the

most subtle feelings in the human heart, and turned his discovery to good account by shattering some worn out conventions and introducing into his novels a greater measure or at least a new form of psychological realism.

VI

ARNOLD BENNETT AND THE FIVE TOWNS

ALL his best work is linked up with his birth-place." It should be remembered that J. B. Priestley was writing in 1924. But it cannot be denied that the local element is essential to the most vigorous period of Bennett's production. As early as 1893 in what was nearly his first published work[1] he introduced a Five Town character. And between that date and 1916 he did write well over fifteen novels and innumerable short stories dealing with the same region. Nor is that all. The psychology of the Five Town man with his repression, chicane, boastfulness and unexpected flashes of tenderness and humour remained a permanent feature of his heroes. Lord Raingo is fore-shadowed in Denry Machin. Earlforward and Evelyn have much in common with Edwin or Darius Clayhanger.

It is equally true that he "created the Five Towns after they had createdhim", to quote from the same critic. But it is not enough to say that these fifteen odd novels constitute "the most notable addition to the atlas of topographical fiction since Trollope next to Hardy's Wessex." Balzac, Trollope and Hardy are perhaps as precise as Bennett in their provincial reconstructions. But no other

[1] A *Letter Home.*

novelist had yet devoted so much space to, and lavished so many descriptive details on so restricted a field; no one had so densely populated a single district of a comparatively small town—two squares and a few streets—with such a variety of conflicting characters. F. J. H. Darton attempted in 1915 to draw a map of Bennett's Five Towns, From his plan and from the additional Note he supplies it will be seen that the chief events of the novels are limited to a small quadrangle in the centre of Bursley enclosed between say St. John's Square, Duck Square, Queen Street and the Old Town Hall with a long extension to the South down Trafalgar Road towards Bleakridge and Toft End. If without any attempt at tabulating references we take a glance at the map fresh from re-reading the principal novels, we are struck by the large number of precise memories which are called up by three or four square inches of streets and buildings: St. Luke's Square with the shop of the Baines, occupying the main portion of its South side, continued by the shops of Critchlow and Holl—St. Luke's Square where Denry Machin had his office, where Edwin and Hilda, perched on a barrel, witnessed with contrary feelings the huge procession of the Sunday School Centenary; St. Luke's Square across which Samuel Povey walked to Bolton Terrace on the East Side when his cousin Daniel called him out by throwing a handful of gravel against his pane on the night he murdered his wife. Almost at the North East corner, stands at the end of an old paved yard the Tiger where Alfred Loring set perplexed eyes on Ann Brett, the day after Simon Fuge died. Almost opposite is the townhall with its gold angel visible from afar and rising above the smoke like an unexpected *genius loci.* A little further we

encounter The Blood Tub, in which crude melodramas, expressive of the Five Town's sense of poetry, were performed, but chiefly connected for us with a rowdy meeting of strikers on the evening when the two heroes of *Clayhanger* became engaged. We are now near the opening of Trafalgar Road also packed with Clayhanger associations. First the steam printing works facing Duck Square. At the next corner, on the other side of the road, the Dragon where one night Big James took Edwin to meet a customer; it was then that the boy witnessed with inexplicable emotion the clog dancing turn of Florence Simcox. Down Waterloo Road bump the tremendous tramcars. They will take us as far as Bleakridge, to the new house of the Clayhangers, surrounded by the Orgreaves' garden. A little further, at a corner, probably stood the house of Mr. Brindley, musician, bookcollector and architect, and Mr. Loring's casual host; a few doors down, that of Dr. Stirling who drove Loring right down Trafalgar Road and through Toft End to the Foaming Quart, the highest licensed house in the Five Towns, kept by Jos Myatt the Matador of the North. It was up Trafalgar Road that Edwin walked on that fateful night when, labouring under an irrepressible sense of wrong, he almost made up his mind to leave Hilda, walked as far as Duck Bank, past St. Lukes' Church into Woodisun Bank and along Oldcastle Road, past Shawport, near the site of his new printing works, all the way to Hillport and back to the bridge over the Knype and Mersey Canal where was revealed to him the great truth which gave him strength enough to endure the happiness of marriage. There would be little purpose in pursuing the tale of these associations whose number might easily be increased. It was however

well worth showing how Bennett concentrated his creative faculty over a limited area; how he reconstructed his fragment of Burslem almost house by house and stone by stone so that this group of squares and streets lives in our minds an ideal existence as intense as that of his most convincing characters, like Hugo's Notre-Dame or Huysmans' Cathedral of Chartrcs.

For his muddy streets and pavements he has provided an adequate population which would probably fill St. Luke's Square if they all congregated there. These characters, though generally unrelated to each other, are not either isolated, and are fully aware of each others' existence as cross references from novel to novel constantly illustrate. They appear and disappear in the distance at a corner of the story, thus lending force and coherence to the whole. Their presence is felt or discerned from afar as a sort of landmark, like the gold angel on the townhall at the end of Trafalgar Road. They thus form a kind of Comedie Humaine, narrower and less impressive no doubt, but as firmly organized as that of Balzac. Sometimes even Bennett ventures to bring a number of them together, the most memorable instance being the Clayhangcrs' party in the spring of 1897 at the end of *These Twain.* Among the "few people who had just been asked to come in without any fuss" were Janet Orgreaves, the delightfully stupid Vera Cheswardine who thought she had murdered a mandarin, Mr. and Mrs. Fearns with their daughter Annunciata and Renee Souchon, the French governess, Ingpen, Dr. Stirling and the Swetnams. And together with the Swetnams had come a young Danish girl Manna Host who had her own ideas about the Five Town people and pretended that they concealed their

feelings not through pride but through fear, being essentially cowards.

For from this variety of contrary characters the character of the Five Town man emerges clearly in its essential features which can be reduced to only two for purposes of simplification: first, repression born of pride, puritanism and cowardice, with all the virtues it creates and the host of vices it engenders—stoic callousness, boastful self-assertion, strength of character, diffidence, hypocrisy, chicane, obstinacy and even avarice. Last, invisible, unexpected, unconfessed, an emotional fibre, the "secret fount of happy tears",[1] the "insatiable secret sentimentality of the North"[2], a stunted form of mysticism and romance.

Though we have thus laid bare what are according to Bennett the two mainsprings of the Five Town character, there are of course many secondary features combined with them which add colour and individuality to the whole. However, except so far as they have to be recognized and analysed in the main characters of the novels, we are not so much concerned with their enumeration as with Bennett's attitude to them. This raises an interesting and rather important issue. Was Bennett a man *of on from* the North? Was he inimical to his native town and surroundings? Did he, as many details tend to show, escape from them? Was his picture of the Five Towns but a veiled satire?

There is no clear answer to these questions and his attitude seems truly to have been twofold. Sometimes good-humoured and understanding, appreciative of the good points, not unsympathetic to the weaknesses. The provincial

[1] *Helen with the High Hand,* p. I.
[2] *The Roll Call* p. 239.

in him sided with the native shrewdness, the "hard practical common sense", the "criticalness"[1] of his countrymen. He proclaimed the superiority of "provincial leisure" for "finding oneself" as against the "diffuse dissipation of energy" of the capitals.[2] With "most people of truly distinguished mind", he seemed to "prefer the provinces".[3] He liked the force, the power, the will to work, of the Five Towns. He went as far as to concede their understanding of comfort, their knowledge of music and even of certain forms of literature. Chiefly he was sympathetic to their grim form of humour, their love of a "character", a "card", their readiness to be tickled by a frank expression of egotism. Sometimes even he was ready to condone their worst faults on aesthetic grounds and for reasons of human interest: he pointed out with remarkable understanding, only possible in one born in those latitudes, that this was the "supreme land of picturesque contrast", tenderness and avarice, vulgarity and taste, ignorance and refinement, that the Blood Tub was but an inverted form of poetry, that a rough football player could be as glorious to them as a Spanish toreador. Even a man from the South, even a British Museum official could become aware of this as did Loring when he exclaimed: "I enjoyed all this. All this seemed to me to be fine, seemed to throw off the true, fine, romantic savour of life. I would have altered nothing in it. Mean, harsh, ugly, squalid, crude, barbaric. Yes, but what an intoxicating sense in it of the organized vitality of a vast community unconscious of itself!"

[1] *The Savour of Life.*
[2] *The Regent.*
[3] *The Human Machine.*

There is however ample, overwhelming evidence that this was not Bennett's most common attitude to his native district. Enough has been said in the preceding chapters of the violence of his reactions to the early influences which weighed on his youth—of his violent denunciation of puritanism in particular, to go here into details. To him the Five Towns were "as superstitious and under sway of priestcraft as modern Spain".[1] Nor was his vision distorted by this bias only. He seemed to resent, not without incurring the reproach of self contradiction, the lack of culture and politeness of the population, their "hate of innovation",[2] their unhealthy neglect of light, heat and comfort in general, their crass ignorance of literature and mistrust of all forms of fiction, their hate of the mere word "intellectual". These faults he viewed with pessimism and ill-humour. He discerned as the chief reason for them the narrowness of municipal life, excessively developed in those six contiguous cities, with their "vast apparatus of Mayors and Aldermen and chains of office",[3] their "six townhalls and their six jealousies",[4] their love of gossip and meddlesomeness. As often as not without giving reasons or looking for causes, he merely indulges, directly or indirectly, in violent almost savage imprecations; "ce sont des barbares" exclaims George Cannon's father. "How I loathe the provinces" answers Hilda. They are for Edwin "an ignoble race of slatternly serfs". We know from the *Journals*[5] that he shuddered at

[1]*Things that have Interested Me,* III, p. *66.*
[2]*Paris Nights,* p. 219.
[2]*Whom Cod Hath Joined.*
[4]*Paris Nights,* p. 219.
[5]1927.

the mere sight of the pottery district from the train. In a passage of her unpublished novel *He Was Watching,* from which I am allowed to quote, Mrs. Arnold Bennett describes her husband's mood on the night when he first took her to the Five Towps. It is an important document:

> We are not likely to live here for good? I inquired.
>
> God forbid! I hate the place. . . . Boredom everywhere—people half-alive; though intelligent, so narrow-minded! . . . No freedom here; everyone knows everybody else. I would never have brought you to such a place if it had not beeivfor the Mater. It is dirty, dark, depressing____Look at those quotations from the Bible posted round us. . . . I was saturated with so much morality and religion that I am thoroughly sick of it. . . . There is the source of boredom—too much puritanism—austerity. To be jolly is considered either bad form or un-christian. Long faces are not only admitted, but are expected to be in the majority.... To think that I was made to go to chapel every Sunday—to both services—and to Sunday School of course. I dreaded Sunday. Faces were longer than ever on Sunday—dreadful.[1]

In two of his short stories which are perhaps his most exquisite masterpieces, *The Matador of the Five Towns* and *The Death of Simon Fuge,* Arnold Bennett has admirably described the Five Town atmosphere as it affects a stranger from the South. *The Matador* is probably superior in genuine unaffected pathos and seems to give evidence of the author's more favourable attitude of mind, as shown in the extract which has already been quoted. But the earlier story is unquestionably the more delightful and original of the two. The gradual smashing of all romantic illusions at the gross

[1] *He Was Watching,* Book III, *The Wheel of Life.*

touch of the Five Town minds, the sense of the ingratitude of the provinces to the artist born in their midst, is admirably compensated and neutralized by an impartial presentment of facts and a casual hint that the "barbarians" have their good points and are not incapable of some forms of artistic enjoyment, while it is admitted that the great painter who has just died was not free from the worst weaknesses. The unique charm of the tale lies in this transparency on the part of the writer resulting in a gentle ambiguity which is maintained throughout the narrative as we gradually hear more and more about Simon Fuge and his relation to his fellow townsmen. As Bennett himself later noticed, the technique is reminiscent of Tchekhoff and foreshadows Kathcrine Mansfield.

Does it however betray anything of Bennett's own real feelings? Perhaps. The last pages are capable of a personal appHcation which goes far to explain Bennett's sense of grievance. "Who the devil was Simon Fuge?" asks Brindley. "He was a great artist", answers Loring. "And this is his native district. Surely you ought to be proud of him!" Of course Bennett at once supplies an excuse for the implied criticism contained in Loring's words so as to maintain the sense of uncertainty. Besides, this was written before Bennett was famous and the Five Towns had had a full opportunity of displaying their indifference and ingratitude which is so well summarized in the following paragraph from J. B. Priestley's *English Journey:*

Oddly enough I do not think I heard Bennett's name mentioned once during all the time I was in the Potteries. In a Year Book of the district though there were thousands of names mentioned, I never caught sight of his. Very odd this. There is a

great deal in this Year Book about the product of North Staffordshire. Surely Bennett and his excellent novels deserve a place among those products. And what single man in our time did more to make the Potteries known than Bennett did? In this blathering Year Book there is not a single town councillor or territorial officer who is apparently not regarded as being of more importance in the district than one of his country's best contemporary novelists. The visit of any empty big-wig matters mere to the editor of this compilation than Bennett and all his works. . . . I wonder if there is a country in Europe in which musicians, painters, authors, philosophers, scientists count for less than they do in this country....

But *A Man from the North* had already been received with hostility in the circle of Bennett's acquaintances in Burslem. And he was critical enough to foresee—though not to accept—what his countrymen's attitude would be if, as he was confident he would, he ever became famous. Much later, in the course of a letter dated 1927, Bennett, after hearing that a special article on him had been published in a Norwegian newspaper on the occasion of his sixtieth year, reflected "No English paper will celebrate my soixantieme birthday in this way".[1] The bitterness of the misunderstood artist is apparent in Bennett's attitude to the Five Towns which, in their turn, reacted in the way described by Mr. Priestley to the pessimistic tone of his pictures. "He created the Five Towns after they had created him". But the relation between the creator and the created was no more satisfactory than the relation between parents and children in most of his novels. He will not be to the Five Towns what Scott is to Scotland, George Sand to the Berry. There

Dorothy Cheston Bennett. *Arnold Bennett: a Portrait done at Home,* p. 312.

is a misunderstanding at the root of his bitterness. It is not so much that he identifies himself with Simon Fuge. He was careful to point out with admirable fairness that a case could be made out for the Five Town indifference to the painter. In fact, in the story, he is almost (not quite) as much on the side of Brindley as on that of Loring. His complaint was precisely that he was no Simon Fuge. He was no bohemian, no aesthete, no loose talker, no braggart; he did not "come from a family that had a bad reputation for talking too much and acting the goat." He achieved literary fame, he compelled admiration in a typical Five Town manner—by honest work powerfully done, by accurate description without undue display of sentiment. But the Five Town public did not recognize the essential virtues of their race in these methods—they wanted something different from what they really were—they expected from an author other qualities than those which they themselves used in common life—they wanted a sentimentalized vision of their minds and ways which Bennett was not prepared to give. The misunderstanding was really that of a superior mind, of a higher artist, with a collection of the average ordinary minds of which a public is always constituted. It was inevitable. "Perhaps we are proud of him", said Brindley of Simon Fuge. "But you don't expect us to show it, do you? That's not our style". It was that unexpressed, half concealed pride in his literary work that Bennett expected from the Five Towns. He did not get it and suffered.

VII

MODERN COMEDY

THAT these novels are essentially modern is easy enough to feel, especially when compared with the pre-war stories. Modern they are in their setting describing with hardly an exception the brand-new world which had with incredible speed risen on the shattered remains of the old—a world of palace hotels, night clubs, pleasure cruises, winter sports and Riviera madness, a world in which "emperors had been cast from their thrones, trains had been superseded by aerial mails and gold by paper", while "empty dwelling-houses had come to be as rare and precious as pearls".[1] A new society with new manners—"the easy-going intimacy of post-war manners"[2]—moves in this new world. The characters too have changed. Or rather in the light of this universal revolution Bennett has been able to develop and emphasize what had always been permanent features of his psychological art: the deepening gulf between young and old ("the greatest difference in the world is that between one generation and another")[3], the constant unashamed contradiction in moods and feelings now recognized and accepted thanks to Freud and the surrealists,

[1] *The Limits of Dominion {Elsie and the Child).*
[2] *The Toreador (The Woman who Stole Everything).*
[3] *Lilian.*

a frank cynical sensuousness, an intoxicating sense of the power of man to create new wonders, together with an increased appetite and capacity for enjoying things, for seeing the commonplace as '"marvellous", "wonderful", "amazing". But, chiefly, a modem spirit, an atmosphere which cannot be explained or analysed, pervades these novels. The reader feels, without ever being expressly told, that Bennett sides with the new state of things against the old and exults in its triumph. No better proof of this could be found than the delightful little tale entitled *The Mysterious destruction of Mr. Ipple.*[1] It soon becomes obvious that Mr. Lewis Ipple, who "lets it be understood that he is 'fifty-eight'" and has "a prominent nose, a body to match and a waistcoat not unspotted" is far more than a grotesque character who happens to be a dramatic critic in a superficial short story. In fact he was, in some respects, a copy from life and can with fair certainty be identified with A. B. Walkley whom Bennett had frequently opposed and ridiculed in his literary articles of *The New Age.* But Mr. Ipple is already anticipated in McQuoid, the dramatic critic of *What the Public Wants.* In fact, whatever his origins, he is a symbolic figure: he becomes, on the threshold of the new world, the embodiment of the old conservative ways of thinking and feeling in their most conventional and dogmatic form. In art, he is a sentimentalist and a hypocrite, a champion of the very dramatic conventions which Bennett had constantly denounced. When told by the heroine that he "must like the new school of playwrights", he "merely raised his hands—a trick which he had learnt in the drawing-rooms of French actresses". Far from

[1] JEbfc *and the Child.*

liking the new school, he loathes it profoundly. He hates irony and realism for the simple reason that he does not "desire the stage to be like life. He wanted the stage to be one thing and life quite another". When he encounters one of these modern plays exhibiting such troublesome tendencies he at once crushes it with a terrific broadside of epithets ever ready at his command: "dangerous, unwholesome, sickly, shamelessly cynical, formless, amateurish, insidious, continental". Thus he stands, formidable in his knowledge of the past (he can at a moment's notice reel off "an account of the ages at which during the past hundred years actresses had developed into leading ladies"), a deadly foe to youth and youthful sincerity, the champion of mighty traditions. Even the clever young critic Arthur Several is no match for him and gets the worse of the argument. The only weakness in Mr. Ipple's strong armour is that he happens to be dead. He is the dead representative of a dead or dying world, dying conventions, dying art, dying modes of feeling. The proof of it is that it suffices for him to encounter someone really alive—the brilliant young actress Betty Brik who achieves fame at the unprecedented age of nineteen, Betty Brik whose ebullient personality is the frank embodiment of the new forces—to realize his own impotence and accept his own destruction. With hardly any struggle or attempt at resistance Mr. Ipple removes himself from a world which has no longer any use for him. Bennett never more clearly revealed himself on the side of youth and change than in this apparently trifling short story.

It is doubtless because he feels he is so heartily at one with the young that the tone of his later novels is always

lighter, brisker, one might even say healthier than that of his earlier productions. Comedies they are and always remain. With the possible exception of *The Strange Vanguard* they never sink to mere farce, and he does not repeat such performances as *A Great Man* and *Helen,* or even *Buried Alive* and *The Card.* There is, even in *Prohack* and *Lilian,* a minimum of realism and psychology as well as a certain lightness of touch which saves his stories from the old taint of vulgarity. Moreover, though the melodramatic incidents of the early "fantasias" have been definitely eliminated, there is no lack of serious or even tragical episodes in those later novels: Joe's madness, the prolonged agony of Raingo or the Earlforwards. But even in these darkest places, even in that dreaded back shop where Earlforward starves himself to death, almost gloats upon the knowledge that he suffers from a mortal disease which makes the consumption of food impossible, even in that ghastly haunt of dismal Clerkenwell, there prevails a lighter and healthier atmosphere than in the cruelly realistic pages of *Clayhanger* or the morbid descriptions of conjugal misunderstanding in *These Twain. Riceyman* is a dreadful novel, but it has somehow an exhilarating influence on the reader, while *The Old Wives Tale* leaves him depressed. It seems that as he grew older Bennett was less obsessed by ideas of death, age and mediocrity—that he breathed more freely in a freer world. The deep reason for this was probably that owing to the change in manners and atmosphere he was able to write with less restraint; he was relieved to a certain extent from that perpetual compromise with public taste which he had described and even justified in 1914, but which could not but hamper the natural flow of his talent. He was now

composing in a freer vein and consequently in a brighter mood. He was ever writing modern comedy—always honest and of a high literary standard, sometimes serious and even well-nigh tragical—but comedy it always was.

If one wants to discover the first evidence of the remarkable change in outlook which I have attempted to describe one should perhaps go as far back as *The Lions Share* published in 1916 but composed in the previous year. The value of the novel is indeed slight and Bennett himself admitted that it was "light and of intent not deeply imagined"[1] It deals with wealthy, sophisticated so-called artistic circles in London and Paris just before the war. But the somewhat exaggerated anti-German point of view from which some of the episodes are conceived sufficiently shows that it was written after 1914. Bennett's Frenchmen are as little satisfactory as his Germans, though, and Musa with his incredible French-English jargon is but a parody of Chirac who, let it be remembered, was already a caricature. What Bennett probably considered as the chief originality of the book was the introduction in the book of a suffragette, Jane Foley, and of scenes connected with the violent campaign which had just been raging through England. The feeling about those events was so strong that the Strand Magazine objected to publishing the novel on this very ground. Such passages are now entirely powerless to establish a permanent value for the volume, all the more so as the style is extremely uneven and some of the episodes (such as the policemen vainly trying to reach Jane Foley, who has elected the centre of the Joy Wheel at the great Birmingham Fair as a position of vantage to address the crowd) are stamped with un-

[1] *Journals,* II, p. 128, April 1915.

mistakable vulgarity. The interest of the book, if any, *is* to be found in the character of the heroine, Audrey Moore, who wants the "lion's share" of everything, bent as she is on exhausting the field of experience and drinking dry the cup of sensuous and intellectual enjoyment. "J want all the sensations there are" she proclaims. And Madame Piriac, a member of the older generation reflects: "I was never young like that!" "Neither was I " , observes Miss Ingate. "But something very, very strange has come over the world if you ask me." Audrey Moore is closely related to Gracie, and Mimi Winstock and Cora Ussher. She clearly falls among the "modern" heroines of the later novels.

The transition to *Lilian* (1922) is thus made smoother. This is perhaps as light and flimsy a tale as Bennett ever conceived, though very pleasantly written; but it is highly significant. It marks an important stage in his evolution as a novelist. This story of a young typist who, through her beauty and unconscious display of charm attracts the attention of her middle-aged employer Felix Grig, is dismissed from the office by the responsible manager, Felix' own sister, runs away with Felix to the Riviera and becomes his mistress, marries him on his death-bed after he has learnt that she is going to have a child, and returns to London to take from the hands of the indignant Miss Grig the whole property of her brother including the typewriting office—this is in itself a somewhat unusual tale and a fairly daring situation. In fact, when one looks at it closely, some episodes have a strong resemblance to the story of *Sacred and Profane Love*—in particular the Riviera scenes and Lilian's conversations with the French demi-mondaine. But the events are visualized and rendered in a totally different spirit. Instead

of the strained sentimental tirades of Carlotta Peel, the story is told with gentle insidious cynicism; a quiet voluptuousness renders the style unusually warm and mellow. Lilian's connection with Felix is presented in an unobtrusive, matter-of-fact manner without any rhetorical developments or sentimental reverberation. The last interview between the beautiful young widow, unashamed of her precocious pregnancy, and the middle-aged spinster who "carries off her grief, her frustration, her everlasting tragedy, safe and intact and with pomp" from the house which is no longer her own is a masterpiece of quiet irreverence and worldly irony. Indeed our novelist has changed or rather, as he foresaw, "something very, very strange had come over the world," around him.

Mr. Prohack (1922) was composed a few months before *Lilian.* We are now concerned with a middle-aged civil-servant who after unexpectedly coming into a huge legacy is touched by the post-war spirit and plunges into a whirl of pleasures and speculations. We detect here still more obviously the same restless influence at work. The resemblance is however superficial. Though lightly conceived and written *Lilian is* a realistic novel. It presents only too convincingly a very credible story and even raises—if it sets out to raise anything—a very human problem—namely that a wealthy middle-aged man is more likely to have a beneficial influence on a pretty girl than an impecunious young man to whom she is romantically attracted. No such prosaic cynical philosophy is to be looked for in *Prohack.* The story is wildly improbable and little pains are taken to make the worn out trick of the unexpected legacy look more plausible and less threadbare. The gambling by

which Prohack multiplies his heaven-sent fortune is hardly more convincing, as appears in a still clearer form from the dramatized version of the novel produced by Bennett and Knoblock in 1927. But, contrary to what happens in *Lilian,* the central character has great originality and charm and gives the novel whatever value it may have. Prohack is the best, possibly the one really humorous creation in the long list of Bennett's characters if it is admitted that the humour of *The Card* rather lies in the hero's actions than in his conversation or character. In fact one realizes, in the light of this one exception, how truly external and superficial is the humour of all Bennett's "comical" novels—from *A Great Man* to *The Strange Vanguard.* There is little that is humorous about Priam Farll or Alice Challice or even Lord Furber. It is only the situations in which they get placed that may have a comic quality. Prohack on the contrary is a living fount of humour. His conversation is a continuous flow of epigrams and sallies. "His characteristic expression denoted benevolence based on an ironic realization of the humanity of human nature". His humorousness is therefore that of the detached though kindly observer of life and does not spring from any marked oddity of his nature. It is the humour not of Dickens, but of Anatole France. It is indeed significant that Prohack challenges comparison with M. Bergeret. There is of course no conscious imitation. Bennett, to create Prohack, drew on the personal experience which he had had of civil servants and Government Services as Director of French Propaganda in 1918; as also on his own treasure of wisdom and mellowing experience. But it so happens that the British civil servant with his strong general culture and habits of professional seclusion is as

near an equivalent as could be found in English society to the French University Professor who, let it be noted, is also a civil servant and differs so widely from the corresponding species of the British fauna. True Prohack's conversations either at club or the breakfast table are just a little spectacular and theatrical, and it is significant that in the stage version a great many of his sentences could be transferred bodily without any transformation. He also lacks something of the exquisite culture and curious erudition of Bergeret or, for that matter, of Jerome Coignard. But the same spirit of clear-sighted benevolence and cynical though bland resignation informs both characters. "For myself I belong to too many clubs." "But I thought you had only two clubs, Arthur." "Only two, but it's one too many. In fact I'm not sure if it isn't two too many." "Are you getting disgusted with human nature." "No," said Mr. Prohack, "I'm getting hard up. I've committed the greatest crime in the world. I've committed poverty. And I feel guilty." Mr. Bergeret had no clubs; he would not have wanted and could not have afforded to join them to begin with. Yet we feel that, in similar circumstances, he would not have expressed himself otherwise.

Accident (published in 1928 but composed in 1926-27) is a brilliant novel. Its interest however is not due to psychological invention. The characters are indeed sketchy to a degree and even approach a semi-medieval simplification extremely rare in Bennett—as appears for instance from the very name of Alan Frith-Walter's secretary, Miss Office, who might almost be an allegorical part in some modern Morality-play. There is more subtlety in the relation between Mr. and Mrs. Lucass—an old couple still deeply in

love with each other despite constant quarrels in which the wrongs are not entirely on the woman's side; the pleasant episodes in which they appear read like an acid version of Philemon and Baucis. Nevertheless the interest of the novel is elsewhere. It lies entirely in the situatipn which was suggested to Bennett by a personal experience—a minor railway accident in which he was involved in France sometime in or before 1911. Of this experience her gave two accounts, in *Books and Persons*[1] and *Things that have Interested Me*[2] which are slightly contradictory in some respects. But in both passages are to be found typical details of which he made full use in his novel: first the fact that he was reading a book when the accident occurred—though this has been altered from Villiers de l'lsle Adam's *Eve Future* to Wordsworth's *Prelude*. It will be remembered that in *The Death of Simon Fuge* Alfred Loring was reading the *Excursion* on his way from London to Knype. It seems that Bennett, in spite of some critical reservations, had for Wordsworth a typical middle class admiration. At any rate Alan Frith-Walter responded to his inspiration even though the passage which he was then just reading

> ... the deep solemnity
> Of Nature's intermediate hours of rest....

did not seem "exactly apposite to a railway accident". The nature of the accident, the way in which it affected the car and compartment of the characters concerned, even the collector's preposterous request for Frith-Walter's ticket

[1] *A Book in a Railway Accident.*

• I . *Railway Accident at Mantes.*

when he walked up the line to the nearest station are identical in the novel and the narratives which preceded. The originality of the book does not however solely consist in the description of the accident, which is simply and convincingly presented, but rather *in* the fact that the whole story including Frith-Walter's holiday, his acquaintance with the Lucasses and chiefly the crisis in his son's conjugal life is closely connected with and entirely contained in the limits of that twenty-four hours' journey from London to the Riviera. Thus a manner of classical unity is obtained, a unity of time and place which might almost be called unity of train—with the introduction of incidents to help or retard the course of the story—Pearl's presence, the Lucasses' decision, Jack's unexpected appearance at Aix-les-Bains. Meanwhile the fateful approach of the impending accident is suggested with admirable cleverness by means of a series of omens or minor mishaps from the sudden inexplicable stop on the Kentish line to the vision of dead cattle carcasses at Laroche. The maximum effect is thus reached with great economy of means—and the very commonplace story of a serious misunderstanding between husband and wife is rendered unexpectedly interesting. But here, contrary to what generally happens with Bennett, the effect is achieved rather by originality of conception than by patient accumulation and articulation of details.

Like many popular writers Bennett left an unfinished novel. *Dream of Destiny* (published in 1932, composed in November and December 1930) is unfinished not only in the sense that it was not revised and that many episodes seem to call for development and completion, but also literally, in the way that *Edwin Drood* and *Celts and*

Saxons are unfinished: the story stops short after barely 150 pages before the plot has finally taken shape. And there is more plot in the story than in most of Bennett's books; in fact its very incompletion gives it a sort of mysterious flavour, not unlike Dickens's novel, which might have been exploited by enterprising publishers. In the course of a garden party Roland Lane Smith, controlling manager of a block of tenement flats, is introduced to a beautiful and talented actress, Phoebe Friar, and the two are powerfully attracted to each other; but during the very first minutes of their acquaintance Roland has remembered a dream he had recently in which he met an identical girl in identical circumstances, fell in love and married her in spite of the ominous fact that the clergyman dropped down dead just before the ceremony. It was indeed an unlucky union, as the dream further illustrated, for the wife of his vision died *in* childbirth with their progeny. Now what should the controlling manager of the Tenement do? Should he propose or not? Should he ignore the "Dream of Destiny" or obey the solemn warning? The situation is deftly contrived, and is all the more intriguing as the imperfect novel provides no answer. Fortunately (or unfortunately) we get clues as to the probable course of events from a short story entitled *Dream*[1] which, as was the case with *The Glimpse* and *The Strange Vanguard,* is but a rough sketch or first draft of the unfinished *Dream of Destiny.* In the story the hero makes light of the dream until the actual death of the clergyman on the very day of the ceremony prompts him to run away without offering any explanation and thus save

Collected in *The Night Visitor.* The connection seems to have escaped most critics.

the life of his prospective wife. He finds solace and forget-fiilness in the "undreamt of" presence of a fair stranger on the banks of an Italian lake. There are however in the longer story some new elements such as the introduction of the Hon. Millicent Redcorm, the aristocratic fiancee of one of Roland's friends, and the description of Phoebe's nervous disease which point to more complex developments. Bennett's heroes have a trick of marrying the unexpected woman at the unexpected time and one feels tempted to conjecture that Millicent would eventually have become Roland's wife, while Phoebe, cured at once of her neurasthenia and of her previous perilous attachment, would have accepted the name of Millicent's rejected suitor. Readers of Bennett's novel find the plot rather unusual, as also the style with its frequent use of words like "conscious", "unconscious", "subconscious" and "subjective". Beneath this superficial novelty there are however familiar elements. First the minute description of the development and evolution of a precise form of disease—in this case stage-fright and consequent neurasthenia. Lastly Bennett's interest in the supernatural was not new. In *The Ghost* and *The Glimpse* he had shown some knowledge of the literature of spiritualism. In some of the short stories which he published about this period there *is* evidence that he was again attracted to unusual occurrences which admitted of a transcendental explanation. In *The Peacock,*[1] in *Under the Hammer*[2] as well as in the stories now under consideration the supernatural element is never crudely displayed or asserted, but it is all the more effective for being merely suggested.

[1]*The Nieht Visitor and Other Stories.*
Mb.

What is new however in *Dream of Destiny* is the semi-Freudian atmosphere of "repressions" and "complexes" as best illustrated in the Doctor's account of Phoebe's case at the end of the unfinished novel.

We are thus naturally led to say something of Bennett's short stories after 1919. They were fairly numerous and fill three volumes which evenly balance the three collections of Five Town *Tales*. Some are so light or so cheaply sentimental *(Lost Love, The Seven Policemen, Myrtle at 6 a.m.)* as to be entirely worthless (as were also many of the earlier *Tales*). Others on the contrary are pure masterpieces which can rank with *Simon Fuge* and *The Matador*. Such is of course *Elsie and the Child* which for lightness of touch remains unequalled- But there are others like *The Mysterious Destruction of Mr. Ipple, The Cornet Player, The Wind* that, without being quite of the same quality, come very near perfection too. In these as in many others there breathes a freer spirit of unaffected humour which is typical of Bennett's work at the time. On the whole the standard of these forty-three stories is remarkably high, probably higher than that of the *Tales* and *The Matador,* and certainly displays considerably more variety. The Five Town vein is still represented in a very minor key by three stories: *The Limits of Dominion, What I've Said I've Said* and *Death, Fire and Life,* the latter being in the pure tradition of the *Grim Tales* and offering considerable interest for the topographical reconstruction of Bennett's Bursley. But there are certain new features in the books, or at least features which are developed in a new manner. I have just referred to the group in which the supernatural element occurs. Others on the contrary and those very numerous describe the gayer

and more materialistic aspects of modern life: Hotel life *(The Hat,*[1] *Strange affair at a hotel*[2]*),* yachts and pleasure cruises *(Middle Aged*[3]*),* foreign travel and cosmopolitan resorts *(The Toreador,*[4] *A Place in Venice,*[5]*)* winter sports *(The Mouse and the Cat*[6]*).* Sometimes they are simply sympathetic descriptions of the modern spirit at grips with the effete conventions of a changing world: *The Perfect Creature,*[7] *A Very Romantic Affair,*[8] *The Mysterious Destruction of Mr. Ipple.*[9] Within this new world which he so frequently describes Arnold Bennett often turns to the world of the stage which, largely through Miss Cheston's influence, he now knew intimately: *The Fish*[10] and *House to Let*[11] are excellent satires of the Actor character, talented or not, but equally conceited and self centred. *The Second Night*[12] and *The Understudy*[13] are perfect descriptions of stage life. *Venus rising from the Sea*[14] is an admirably fair and realistic picture of the average life of an obscure though not untalented actress, and of the importance of luck in the making of a theatrical career. In many of these stories appears a new character, rather cynically and mercilessly

[1]*The Night Visitor,* etc.
[2]Ib.
[3]*The Woman Who Stole Everything,* etc.
[4]Ib.
[5]Ib.
[6]*The Night Visitor,* etc.
[7]*Elsie and the Child,* etc.
[8]*he Woman Who Stole Everything,* etc.
[9]*Elsie and the Child,* etc.
[10]Ib.
[11]Tfe *Woman Who Stole Everything,* etc.
[12]*The Night Visitor,* etc.
[13]lb.
"Published separately in 1931, reprinted with *Dream of Destiny* in 1932.

drawn, that of the modern girl or woman, charming and desirable, bright though occasionally stupid, above all entirely selfish and unscrupulous. Of course Bennett had already given us very unsentimental pictures of the feminine character such as only a hardened bachelor and an ex-editor of a woman's magazine might have drawn. But these new characters are radically different from the mysterious and wilful Hilda, the self-willed adamantine Sophia, or even the delightfully stupid Vera Cheswardine. In the later works of Bennett they form a long gallery of characters which have essentially in common selfishness and cynicism—beginning with Audrey of *The Lions Share* and including Nina, the chief character in the play entitled *The Love Match,* and Gracie in *Imperial Palace.* This new feminine incarnation is in Bennett's own words[1] "the social butterfly of our day; she is sensual; she is an adulteress; she is greedy for pleasure; she is selfish; she is vixenish; she is capricious; she is a waster; she is ruthless; and she is charming." For in spite or perhaps on account of her very faults and lack of moral sense she is to her creator and analyst "charming", "interesting", "wonderful"—in a word intensely "exciting". She is the sudden revelation of the "vamp" or post war "flapper" as she appeared to a dazzled, shocked and delighted bachelor of fifty. We have mentioned some of her various names and incarnations in the plays and novels, but of course she is really called Cora Ussher, "the woman who stole everything". In that novelette of about eighty pages, Bennett has given us a bold powerful study which with a little more elaboration and complexity might have developed into one of his major stories. Never have the cruel

***things that have Interested Me, II,* p. 216.**

sensuous depths of the feminine soul been more subtly and relentlessly probed than in the course of this disquieting narrative.

The great objection to the theory[1] of the slow but steady degeneration of Bennett's talents from *The Old Wives' Tale* to the end of his career will always be that between 1918 and 1930 he produced four great novels—*The Pretty Lady, Riceyman Steps, Lord Raingo, Imperial Palace*—which have each claims to be styled masterpieces. Different they are from the work that preceded, but not necessarily inferior. They are shorter, and more interesting; the psychology of the characters being, not so much subtler, as more precise, less lethargic and more active. They are far more outspoken, sometimes deliberately cynical, though never crudely so. And they combine to a much greater degree than before daring satire and dry humour with purely objective description or narrative.

As we read the first pages of *The Pretty Lady* (1918) our expectations are indeed roused. The novel was conceived in May 1917, when Bennett "had an idea for a short novel about an episode in the life of a French cocotte". What attracted him was the self-imposed difficulty of telling "practically everything about her existence without shocking the B.P".[2] But, as we know, he had long before been haunted by the possibility of such a theme of which only caution had probably delayed the treatment. *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Sacred and Profane Love* were already half-hearted attempts in that direction. As early as 1910 he noted in a description of a night-club scene which occurs in *Paris*

[1]See Geoffrey West: *The Problem of Arnold Bennett,* 1933.
journals, II, p. 196.

Nights[1] that "some of the odalisques are beautiful. Fine women in the sight of heaven! They too are experts with the preoccupation of experts, they are at work and this is the battle of life. They inspire respect. It is—it is the dignity of labour". This idea is at the root of his conception of Christine.

It was obviously the war which caused the long discarded idea to be fulfilled. As long as he felt that the public would not allow him to treat the subject as he wanted, Bennett preferred to set it aside. But when, with his admirable sense of literary possibilities, he discerned that the old equilibrium had been destroyed, that a new and more acceptable compromise between decencies and realities could be offered to the readers, he was not slow in taking advantage of it. This was under the pressure of tremendous and unexpected events. As the gentle heroine herself says: "The war in London has led to the discovery that men have desires. . . ."[2] And he was careful to steep the whole narrative in a war-atmosphere which was not by any means essential to it. He was careful to convey the sense, then of course prevalent in many parts of the world, that "perhaps the frame of society was about to collapse." When surrounded by danger, death and supreme uncertainty many thoughts and actions become permissible, even in literature. Bennett was quick to see his chance and took it to a proper accompaniment of shells, air raids, and military brass.

For the novel is about a girl of that class "which respectable broad-minded women, when bantering, called with

[2] *Cause Cilibre.*
[2] Chap. XXXVII.

amused indifference 'pretty ladies*."I But in spite of this chaste circumlocution the novel is treated with fearless though quiet realism. With a few necessary omissions or allusions, he is "playing the game" and tackling the subject as it had not befpre been tackled. Goncourt in *La Fille Elisa,* Balzac in *Grandeur et Miske des Courtisanes,* Zola in *Nana,* Colette in *Cheri* have shown us episodes which are extraneous *Ko* the real life of the prostitute: the precise moment when they rise above, sink below or in some way exceed or transgress the ordinary rules and standards of their profession. Even George Gissing's Ida Starr in *The Unclassed* is unreconciled to the life she is leading, a life which has been enforced by circumstances and from which she eagerly desires to escape. Christine would have intensely disliked her, as she did most of her English colleagues, for being so unprofessional, so amateurish. With classical firmness of touch Bennett shows us in Christine the typical prostitute, neither of too low nor too high a type, in the exercise of a profession which she may not have exactly chosen but which she is determined to carry on with as much dignity and honesty as is consistent with its very nature. Once one has determined to take such a subject for a theme, it surely is the only fair and honest manner of treating it.

On Christine's character, Bennett has lavished all his pains; it is one of the most finished, most patiently constructed in all his novels. He did not make her French by accident, or through fear of national prejudice; but because some of the essential features of her personality are illustrated in contrast with English customs and ways of feeling; and

[1] **Chap. XLI.**

because she is endowed with all the Latin sense of technique, the conscience of the artist or the artisan. Christine Dubois is twenty-six, "pretty, highly developed, short, lissom", youthful; her puckered brow[1] betrays application and ingenuousness; her great desire is to please, .her great fear, obesity. She was instructed in her trade by her own mother, when the latter saw the inanity of her efforts to raise her daughter to another status. The point is all-important. Christine has been schooled, initiated. She *is* not like those English courtesans, her colleagues, with their "characteristic insipidity, lackadaisicalness, and ignorance of the profession", who expect "to be paid for doing nothing".[2] She has been warned about "the five great plagues" or scourges of the trade, about the danger of alcohol and insomnia to a good complexion, "the source of money". She has also had instruction as to the psychological aspect of her career: she knows how to deal with clients of different nationalities, and has been taught to be ruled by the lofty far-sighted principle that "generosity towards men in small things is always repaid by generosity in big things—and if it is not, the loss is so slight".[3] She is indeed an expert, a technician; and it is typical that Bennett was attracted by this side of her life, as he was attracted to the lives of salesmen, waiters and actors—professions in which the technique is particularly subtle and human. By her very skill, by her sense of duty and service she preserves that dignity and self-respect which others foolishly think to maintain by pretending to despise

[1]Her physical appearance was it appears drawn from life. See *Journals,* II, p. 289.

[2]Chap. XXIII.

[3]Chap. IV.

the very mode of life which they have chosen. She knows that she has "a function in society" and impresses this truth on those who approach her. Hence her "conviction that her sin is not like that of others", that she is "not really an ordinary courtesan". Hence her refinement, what G. J. Hoapes paradoxically calls "her virtue, her purity": "she had had scarcely any experience save one kind of experience".[1] This *is* most daringly emphasized by means of a continuous contrast between the morbid mental and moral instability of the society women frequented by the hero and the healthy equilibrium of Christine. She is "like a balm after such exciting creatures". She stands for purity, they stand for vice.

> Of the same lump (as it is said)
> For honour and dishonour made
> Two sister-vessels—Here is one. . . .

But Bennett did not choose Rossetti's lines as an epigraph to his book, not being sufficiently convinced of the respective honour or dishonour of the two earthly vessels. He turned to Butler whom he seems to have been reading closely at the time to strengthen himself on the difficult road of merciless realism and culled from his work the following epigraph which is a clue to the spirit in which *The Pretty Lady* was written:

> Virtue has never yet been adequately represented by any who have had any claim to be considered virtuous. It is the sub-vicious who best understand virtue. Let the virtuous people stick to describing vice—which they can do well enough.

[1]Chap. XXXI.

But Bennett was at pains to make of Christine a human individual, not the illustration of a theory, the mere instrument of a cynical paradox. He has endowed her with qualities inherited from her French origin: economy and mistrust of all save gilt-edged securities like the City of Paris bonds; understanding of the comfort of the home and especially of the value of stoves as against gas-fires; a constant suspicion of spies and traitors, and respect for military discipline, as "the traditions of a country of conscripts were ingrained in her childhood and youth". She has also other qualities more personal and intimate, which she would not necessarily share with any other French or English colleague. Some, childish and slightly ridiculous, like her fear of London, her inability to understand the English ways or the English language; her use of slang phrases; her taste for sentimental literature of the worst kind *(East Lynne* and *Fantomas),* her pretentious references to music or to her education "in a convent"; others, more serious and profound, like her superstitious worship of the Virgin Mary, conceived as a jealous powerful goddess ever ready to confer blessings or curses; her belief in the value of mascots and her eager response to the mystical discourses of the drunken diseased officer whom she finds asleep in her room on her return from Brompton Oratory. Lastly, that essential quality which is first the cause of her success with G.J. Hoape, then of her ruin—the quality, real or imaginary, with which an Englishman, even one so conversant with French life as was Bennett, would most readily and traditionally endow a girl like Christine—an "unappeasable", "secret", "extreme" sensuality. "The thought of her insatiable temperament flashed through her as she held him, and of his northern

sobriety, and of the profound, unchangeable difference between these two."[1]

It was not however in this picture of Christine, subtle, daring as it is, that Bennett's realism achieved its most striking triumph, but rather in the description of the technical details of her daily existence. The "five great plagues" of the profession are lightly passed over though not ignored. It is again by conferring prominence and significance to minor details that Bennett gives evidence of his remarkable power of sympathy with the strangest sides of human existence. We learn that there is a "chaste" and an "unchaste" side to Coventry Street; we realize the paramount importance of the "promenades" of the great musical theatres to ladies like Christine. Her flat is described in the most realistic, even cynical manner. Not by paying attention to objects which are in themselves indecent or unpleasant, but by placing the most ordinary things in a new light. The telephone, though essential in her profession, must not stand by the bedside for obvious reasons. The *Vie Parisienne* is just as "indispensable a part of the apparatus of the flat" and reminds one of a dentist's waiting-room "except that no dentist would expose copies of *La Vie Parisienne* to the view of clients_Indeed it was a dentist's waiting-room."[2] Again we learn that the great difficulty for Christine is not so much to placate the police or the landlord as the difficulty of keeping clients out of each other's way. Lastly the clash between her rehgion and the profession is bluntly indicated: though an ardent Roman Catholic Christine when confronted with the injunction

[1]Chap. XXXVHI.
[2]Chap. XXXI.

"Essayez de vous rappeler vos peches *et combien defois vous les avez commi"* honestly found that she could not comply with it, and had to give up confession.

In such instances Bennett shows at once the power and the economy of his imaginative realism. The novel treated in this spirit was something new in English literature, and we understand how it appealed to those who, in art or life, shared the same creed that facts should be faced by the author or the man of action. James Stephens opined that *"The Old Wives Tale* was it, but *The Pretty Lady* was itter".[1] As we know, it was on the strength of this book that Lord Beaverbrook offered Bennett a Directorship in his Ministry. George Moore found Christine "the finest cocotte in literature".[2] But we are not surprised to hear that the sister of a well-known statesman who had been a constant reader of his books decided to "have done with him" after *The Pretty Lady.*[3] And we know that, a "very high literary authority in Edinburgh" thought the book "pitiable".[4] As a matter of fact one might have expected more numerous and violent reactions than these. A tribute to Bennett's sense of opportunity and to his art.

With it all, *The Pretty Lady* docs not rank among his greatest novels. One feels that the subject appealed to Bennett, that he had long waited for such a chance, that he delighted in being able to write the book. The central character is well-nigh faultless, and bears evidence of having been composed not merely with care and patience—with

[1]*Journals,* II, p. 250.
[2]*Journals,* II, p. 289.
[3]*Journals,* II, p. 239.
'*Things that have Interested* Me, II. A Great Responsibility.

something like actual tenderness. Much as it is, this is not quite enough to make a masterpiece. The rest of the story is considerably inferior to the best passages. There are signs about it of the weakness and exhaustion that we have detected in contemporary stories like *The Roll Call* or *The Lions Share.* In fact, apart from the satirical passages describing the activities of the Lechford Hospitals Committee (in which Bennett drew on his personal experience as member of similar bodies since 1915) and apart from the fine, sober *denouement,* the parts of the story in which Christine does not appear are sorry stuff indeed. The war scenes (the accident at the Clyde factory, the air-raid) may be necessary to the atmosphere of the novel as shown before; but they are somewhat crude and cheaply emotional. Conception Smith and Lady Queenie Paulle, though possibly drawn from real life,[1] are singularly artificial and uninteresting. Even G. J. Hoape, the typical hero after Bennett's heart, secretive, selfish, cautious and middle-aged is deficient in charm and attraction and becomes slightly repulsive. The style too is uneven, and worse still because unusual, the technique of the novel is not up to the ordinary standard; there are too many extraordinary coincidences in the plot; first G. J.'s meeting with Christine in London after noticing her several months before in Paris; then the presence of the drunken officer in her flat when she returns from Brompton Oratory; then of course their second encounter, if we are not asked to believe in the reality of her supernatural experience; last the unexpected manner in which G. J. comes across Christine on several occasions towards the end of the book. Each separate

journals, **II, p. 232.**

incident may be possible or even true in itself; but as a whole they create an atmosphere of mistrust and disbelief which is extremely rare in Bennett's work. He once wrote that Wordsworth's verse at its best struck him as a mixture of Milton and *Punch. The Pretty Lady* is a mixture of Butler, George Moore and Hall Caine, with just a dash of Marie Corelli.

The praise with which *Riceyman Steps* was received in 1923 seems to have been well-nigh unanimous. In the reviews of the Press as well as in the private letters which it elicited from friends and fellow-novelists it was acclaimed as "a great book"[1] and Professor Grierson awarded it the Tait Black Novel Prize. No discordant note is discernible in contemporary criticism; only perhaps a note of half-suppressed surprise which is best heard in the well-known comment by Conrad "It has always been Bennett militant; but this is Bennett triumphant".[2] It is fairly obvious that at the time no one expected such a masterpiece from Bennett; it was thought that the author of *The Old Wives Tale* was dead or at least crippled, partly through his own fault. And now he was somewhat disconcertingly rising from his grave. No wonder it gave the critics a shock. The success of the novel was all the greater for it.

It is of course one of the most patient and painstaking of Bennett's books. "I thank heaven I have always gone in for technique. And *The Pretty Lady* and *Riceyman Steps* are both in my opinion jolly well constructed and done books."[8]

[1]The same words are used in *The Evening Standard* and in a letter from H. G. Wells *(Catalogue,* p. 40).

journals, III, p. 23. See also *Catalogue,* p. 28.

[2]*Journals,* III, p. 32.

The statement is only half true of the former novel, but in *Riceyman Steps* Bennett has returned to his former methods of careful organization and grounding of the story. It is interesting to note however that Moore while professing to admire the book unreservedly pointed out that it had "no form whatever".[1] Bennett indignantly protested but this impression is I think real in the mind of the reader and proceeds from the very subtlety, possibly from the very excesses of Bennett's technique. The story never appears artificially directed from outside; it seems to drift aimlessly along in fulfilment of its own uncertain destiny. Though it only covers a few months Bennett has had recourse to the old trick of concealing or disguising the passage of time as far as possible. The novel opens in the autumn of 1919: Earlforward's engagement to Mrs. Arb occurs barely a few weeks later, in November. They get married in January 1920. Then Bennett carefully withholds any fresh chronological information; we are left in the dark as to the length of time required for the process of slow starvation to reach its inevitable conclusion. This enables him to renew the striking effect of surprise already achieved in *The Old Wives* Tale,* as has been noted by Mr. Simons;[2] Dr. Raste bending over the shrunken form of Earlforward like Sophia over the withered body of Gerald Scales suddenly reveals to the reader the relentless change which has been taking place. Only in this latter instance the work of time has been hastened and multiplied tenfold by disease and starvation. Moreover Bennett's conception of technique, here carried further than anywhere else, has been to eliminate carefully

[1] *Journals.* III, p. 42.
[2] *Arnold Bennett and His Novels,* p. 266.

all incidents of a violent or merely unusual nature. In *The Old Wives' Tale* there was an elopement, a murder and two public executions; in *Clayhanger,* jilting, bigamy and conjugal warfare; air raids in *The Pretty Lady;* accidents, in *Accident.* But the sum-total of the events in *Riceyman Steps,* as George Moore admirably put it, is this: "A bookseller crosses the road to get married". In the last two parts in particular (200 pages) there is practically no story of any kind, except perhaps Joe's return or Earlforward's determination not to go to hospital. Even Racine would have found it hard to concoct a tragedy out of such elements. In the paucity of the materials which he allowed himself Bennett has surpassed his own Earlforward's parsimonious frugality.

He went a little too far, and the formlessness denounced by George Moore is in fact nothing else than the absence or rather the extreme thinness of the plot. But that each part of the book was carefully thought out, polished and fitted into the whole is certain. In fact the very paucity of the means employed is a sure sign of selection and distribution. This is well seen in the somewhat exaggerated manner in which Bennett prepares the way to introduce apparently trifling details. For instance, it is essential that Earlforward should limp, as this peculiarity will afford some of the finest passages in the central chapter of the Sunday walk with Mrs. Arb which reveals the extent and power of the hero's avarice. But lest this physical disability should appear gratuitous Bennett goes to the trouble of explaining that he had hurt his knee many years before in trying to raise the body of his dead uncle from whom he inherited the shop; which leads him to dwell on the physical appearance of the late T. T. Riceyman and in particular on his fatness which

renders the fall and the permanent injury to the nephew's knee more likely. Similarly in order to secure the reader's acceptance of Mrs. Arb's marriage with Earlforward, Bennett must needs explain that she wants protection and a home; but she .cannot be poor, or it would be incredible that Earlforward would have her. Hence the scrupulous painstaking craftsman imagines that her first husband was a clerk of works who left her well off but without any fixed residence as he had to move continually from one town to another. In like manner Elsie's motive for calling on Dr. Raste and telling him about her master's illness, or her meeting with Eva (which is of course the germ of *Elsie and the Child)* are introduced with snake-like caution and semi-machiavellian foresight. All this becomes a little irritating in the end. One feels that, if the author were put on his mettle, he could write half a dozen chapters, perhaps half a dozen novels, merely to explain why one of his heroes blew his nose with his left hand or had a wart over his right eye. This remark does not apply to *Elsie and the Child* which is professedly a short story without a plot, of the *Simon Fuge* type, in which a succession of disconnected episodes leave us with an ambiguous impression which it is the very purpose of the artist to foster and develop. But in *Riceyman Steps* we feel too often a deliberate determination to be natural and convincing at any cost, to make every chink of the story tight against contradiction or disbelief. 1 doubt whether this exaggerated scruple is part of the greatness of the book. It marks the extreme and probably excessive point of Bennett's technique. It smacks of false casualness and studious verisimilitude—of Henry James or Meredith, not Stendhal.

This tendency to overdo the technical side of the novelist's job, so acute in Bennett's work at the time, with the danger of overconsciousness which it implies was also carried into what remains the chief merit of *Riceyman Steps,* the description of character. We know from contemporary polemics[1] that Bennett then held more strictly than ever that "the foundation of good fiction is character-creating and nothing else",[2] but that "a character has to be conventiohalized... . The thing is to produce an impression on the reader—the best you can, the truest you can: but some impression".[3] And he complained a little later that, in modern novels, "logical construction is absent, concentration of the theme is absent. . . . The new practitioners have simply returned to the facile go-as-you-please methods of the eighteenth century ignoring the important discoveries and innovations of Balzac and later novelists."[4] Now it can safely be said that there are only two characters (Earlforward and Elsie) in *Riceyman Steps* and that the book might more pertinently have been called *Elsie and the Miser.* Mrs. Arb and Joe are both sketched with admirable conscience and delicacy but they are in a minor key. Moreover it is obvious that they are merely meant as foils to the main characters: Mrs. Arb with her desire to yield, her need of security and masculine protection, even her leaning to economy, serves but to emphasize the stronger figure of her husband. She is no real miser though she may be attracted by the power of her husband's vice. But she is conscious of danger and is ready

[1]With Virginia Woolf. See below.
[2]*Things that have Interested Me,* III. *Is the Novel Decaying!*
[3]*Journals,* III, p. 52.
[4]*Savour of Life. Young Authors,* II.

to give up saving when life is at stake. As for Joe, his primitive inarticulate love and jealousy enhance and reveal Elsie's loyalty and strength of character, her physical and sentimental needs. Finally it is Elsie alone who remains with the dying miser and has the courage and energy to nurse him despite the monster which he harbours in his breast. But even Elsie's devotion, tenderness and occasional revolts are mostly felt or remembered because of their sharp contrast with the helpless obstinacy, at once pathetic and terrible, of the Master. The laws of concentration are well observed. All, Mrs. Arb, Joe, even Elsie act as powerful reflectors which focus the light on the central figure of Earlforward.

It is neat, intelligent work—admirable and precise. It is also singularly disquieting. It was to be feared that with such methods, by dint of selection and concentration, Arnold Bennett might give us a sort of revised version of Shylock, Harpagon and Grandet, with some of the old exaggerations attenuated and a layer of modern colour applied, but devoid of any true originality. Avarice is in itself such a simple and exclusive passion that it is at once strangely easy and dangerous to concentrate and abstract it, especially considering that this had already been done supremely well half a dozen times in the history of literature through the very same methods. Between imitation and wild exaggeration the way was indeed strait and slippery. It was part of the difficulty of the theme, the very wager which Bennett won. He did not altogether avoid the formidable obstacle. In spite of his critical sense and delicacy of touch he occasionally went too far. Earlforward's physical worship of gold, in Part III, VI, is reminiscent of *Volpone* and Spenser's *Cave ofManmmon;*

it is not quite convincing and could not be. Such an extreme romantic form of avarice may not be out of place in an Elizabethan drama or an emblematic poem, but it jars with the drab surroundings and the realistic atmosphere. It is indeed well-nigh impossible, especially in our days of economic revolutions, to show an old man ecstatically running his fingers through ducats without risking thereby a comic effect. Bennett attempted to obviate this by means of a feeble sermon on Communism preached by the miser to his wife and maid out of an evening paper which he has had bought for the occasion. The generalization and abstraction are here a little overdone; Earlforward, to justify his passion, rises to general ideas and political economy—which is gratuitous, as his lust for gold is sensuous, instinctive, wholly irrational. In fact more than once, in order to secure his most striking effects, Bennett has recourse to short sentences or interjections suddenly revealing the hero's character which sound like echoes of Moliere and are in the comic tradition. The ring episode, the old safe offered as wedding present seem to come from an Italian comedy of the Renaissance. But Earlforward's greatest *mot*—to the man in charge of the vacuum cleaning machines: "Do you sell the dirt? Do you get anything for it?"—might have been spoken by Harpagon himself, which is no mean compliment. However Moliere did not profess to write realistic novels. And at other times Bennett is not quite so fortunate: the miser's regret at Elsie's "wanton waste of a health-giving food" as she flings rice on the newly-wedded couple, his "I'm too hot" when he insists on her letting the fire go out, and chiefly perhaps his "I shall save a clean shirt" while promising to see a doctor if he does

not feel better after spending two days *in* bed—these are so many traits which might pass on the stage, but seem somewhat forced at a second, if not at a first reading. The continuous candle-lighting, switching off and on of the current is also perhaps open to the same objection.

However Earlforward remains a formidable character who alone would suffice to make the novel great. He is not only powerfully and carefully drawn. He is also deeply original. He is as different from Grandet or Harpagon as might be, and any fear of prolonged imitation or unpleasant exaggeration is soon wiped out of the most critical reader's mind. It is in this, in the presentment of so new, so unexpected a type of miser that lies Bennett's supreme victory—the proof that he is "triumphant", and not merely militant. How is this done? There is one strange quality about Earlforward, perhaps as striking and certainly more frequently witnessed than the acute manifestations of his "grand passion" which are not of every day occurrence. That is his placidity, his calm, serene, almost urbane countenance, his capacity for "letting things go" and "compromising with destiny". One adjective, which recurs in nearly every chapter of the book, is particularly expressive of his nature: "bland". His voice is bland, he delivers bland ultimatums, replaces books blandly on the shelves and blandly admits the arguments of other people. It may be a form of energy, a "soft obstinacy", a realization that this is the best means to his ends, a contempt for unnecessary words and discussions. But Harpagon and Grandet are certainly not bland; they are testy, tyrannical old men, and as for Shylock, his occasional blandness is but the veil of hypocrisy which conceals oriental flames. There are no flames in Earlforward.

In fact it must be admitted that he is strangely passive. Long before the beginning of his illness his vitahty seems greatly reduced. There is something ''mechanical" about his movements. Bennett himself admits that his "reactions are very slow";[1] having faced a danger on the Thursday night he only begins to tremble on the Friday morning.

Thus it is that Bennett is able to endow him with other qualities which one rarely associates with the greed for riches: kindness, patience, almost indolence, and also, in certain matters, a comparative innocence: he has no experience of women, and Mrs. Arb feels older and wiser than he is in some points.

This is all very well and certainly supplies striking effects of contrast. But how is Bennett to reconcile this placidity, this passivity in Earlforward with the devouring activity, the vivacity and restlessness which are typical of the Miser of literary tradition? First, it should be noted that Earlforward is not particularly anxious about the safety of his wealth; his wife is far more sensitive to the risk of robbery. But, and this is the main difference between Earlforward and his predecessors in fiction, avarice is not for him an incentive to increased commercial activity—on the contrary. Harpagon is a usurer of exceptional competence; Shylock has amassed prodigious wealth and can risk money for other motives than speculation; the financial activities of Grandet are of course notorious and Balzac has been lavish of details in that respect: in fact Grandet is a great speculator and a keen businessman before he is a miser. This is perhaps the weakness of these great literary figures, that they are not misers at all, at least not pre-eminently so, that they are first

[1] I, Chap. VIII.

usurers, shipowners or timber merchants and only secondarily misers. Bennett is probably truer to fact, to the average reality of every day life. In the case of Earlforward, though at one time he was "ready to part with money in exchange of stock",[1] avarice has gradually weakened and destroyed the commercial instinct: he can no longer spend money, even to secure large gains, even to avoid consequent losses. To shun the cost of delivery, he risks losing important customers; when faced with the necessity of parting with a ten shilling note for charitable purposes, he prefers to give a rare first edition of Gray which is worth many times more. Avarice is as a blight on his physical and moral life. It is a cause of ruin and death, not of power and prosperity. It is a cancer in his mind as well as in his flesh eating into his very substance.

Yet, avarice is not the only cause of Earlforward's strange business methods. He is naturally indolent, as his rich red lips might tend to corroborate. He wastes valuable minutes dallying luxuriously over his mean breakfast, thus missing sales and auctions, rather than hurry to business. In this the strange passivity of the man is again revealed. And this is precisely why Bennett succeeds where even Molicre had failed—that is in making it credible that a miser should fall in love. For Earlforward is genuinely in love with Mrs. Arb. It is true that he has little experience of women and has for long not been interested in them. But his interest is at last excited. His admiration, his sexual appreciation of her are obvious. Of course they would not be strong enough to conquer, if Mrs. Arb had not money of her own, if marriage with her did not seem legitimate for reasons of convenience.

[1] III, Chap. II. This is one of the few contradictions in the novel.

But, though not capable of strong ecstasies, he rejoices in other things than her thrift or her savings. She is to him a physical revelation; he enjoys her kisses. Her charm makes him feel alive for the first time. And the grand pathos of the novel lies in this: that it is Earlforward's love which rouses the monster of avarice dormant in his breast—which pushes it to extremes—and which (to be precise, by urging Earlforward to cut down the increased expenses of the household) finally moves it to destroy its very instrument.

For Earlforward is a mere instrument. And the strange struggle is only rendered possible by his passivity. He does not identify himself with the desire of gold, the joy which results from its possession as Shylock or Grandet do. He merely watches that power rising and moving in his breast. He cannot dream of fighting it. He can but oppose it to other powers and watch the issue. It may be a "grand passion which has made all his life beautiful",[1] but only in the sense that the development and triumphs of this all-conquering power afforded him a spectacle which he could not ignore or refuse to admire. In fact more than once we feel that Earlforward becomes a mere battlefield in which two forces affront each other. And the novel has not one but three heroes: Avarice, Love and Henry Earlforward; and it ends not in disaster but in the triumph of the former. This is seen in particular in the wholly admirable chapter entitled *The Passion* in which Earlforward's efforts to conquer the force within him, his surprise at the unsuspected strength of the feeling which he harbours, his complete and final surrender are unforgettably depicted. "His passion had won! . . . There were two Mr. Earl-

[1] I, Chap. XIII.

forwards. One splendidly uplifted, the other ready to faint from pain and fatigue".[1] The duality of Earlforward's nature is here conspicuous. There are two men in him: a gentle, kind, bland, tender middle-aged bachelor; and an implacable fiery, indomitable maniac—one living inside the other, preying on the other. Elsie and Mrs. Arb begin to suspect the existence of this Mr. Hyde. And, at last, they are afraid of staying alone in the same house with him.

All this is, to a certain extent, new, at least in its application to the picture of avarice; and Bennett has turned it to wonderful advantage. But it has little to do with "selection and concentration". On the contrary it introduces an element of contradiction and psychological discontinuity which enables Bennett to break away from the dangerous tradition of the Miser in fiction and to create an original figure as the centre of a great novel.

The connection between *Riceyman Steps* and *Elsie and the Child* is close and delicate as appears from passages in the third and fourth parts of the former novel and there can be no doubt that while composing the one, Bennett had already planned the other. Yet, as has been noted, the technique of the two stories is altogether different. While *Riceyman Steps* is conceived so as to afford space and opportunities for the development and evolution of one special character in its principal phases, *Elsie and the Child* is rather the study of a situation, unimportant enough in itself though exceptional: the excessive fondness of a child for the housemaid and the perturbation thus thrown in family relations. While the technique of *Riceyman Steps* reminded one at once of Balzac and Dostoevsky, with here and there a touch of

[1] Chap. XIII.

Stendhal, that of *Elsie and the Child* suggests the influence of Tchekhoff and Katherine Mansfield, and chiefly of Andre Gide. But in fact it is essentially an ambiguous short story, composed as it were with an eye to various types of readers so that several threads of interest are intertwined or rather laid side by side. It may be considered as cfescriptive of the private life of a panel doctor in one of the poorer districts of London, and as such is of real, though limited interest. It can be taken as a sequel to *Riceyman Steps* showing us something of the married life of one of the principal characters and of her new surroundings: Elsie is of course all-important in both novels. In the longer book she appeared with physical and moral qualities which made her equally remarkable: strongly-built, plump, with superb arms and bust and a square soft face, this war-widow of twenty-three was a magnificent toiler as Mrs. Arb and her husband well knew; but she was also a glorious sight and had captured the violent Joe, awakened amorous desires in the heart of the boy Jerry, and attracted the notice of Miss Eva Raste. But Elsie is not vain or light-headed; her early widowhood and long poverty have matured her. She is loyal both to her masters and to her lover Joe even when he seems to have abandoned her. She is anxious to serve, ever worrying to do her duty as evidenced by the constant pucker on her brow.[1] It was Bennett's great triumph to realize and make plain, not the complexities or peculiarities of a character so remote from his own field of experience, but on the con-

[1] **Whcn she joins the Raste household a little later this desire to serve becomes qualified by the sense of her independence as a married woman, and her unsophisticated soul is disconcerted, as Bennett unsurpassably shows, by the conventions of domestic etiquette. She is too honest and devoted to make a good servant.**

trary her very limitations, lack of sophistication and animality. With all her loyalty and diffidence, this big plump girl has physical needs which cannot be overcome: she must eat and cannot stand hunger beyond a certain point, even though she may be horrified at her own conduct when the irresistible impulse comes over her to cat the egg or the steak which were not intended for her. After the sad parting from Eva at the station she suddenly feels hungry. She has other appetites. She is unconsciously and ingeniously sensuous; she wants Joe's caresses and unhesitatingly shares her bed with him when he returns a sick man; she experiences satisfaction and something like a thrill when giving Jerry the kiss he shamelessly demanded; for all her delight in the privacy of her new room in Riceyman's house she "missed the warm, soft body of the furniture polisher's child with whom she had slept so long." This is again and most disturbingly seen in her relations with Eva Raste. For the story can also be read as a study of a child's soul with subtle Freudian implications. One may of course see nothing in it but a little domestic drama delicately told—one of those clashes between parents and children which Bennett delights in describing with minute intensity. But one cannot be blind to the ambiguity of the situation: Eva's sudden liking for Elsie, her influence over the young woman who accepts the position of maid to the Rastes merely for her sake, the strange affection between the two revealed by Elsie's sobs when she hears while waiting at table the news that Eva is to go to a boarding school, the parents' alarm and displeasure, and chiefly Joe's explosion of jealousy. Of course Bennett's handling of the theme is perfect, as subtle as Gide's might have been, but there can I think be little

doubt that the impression of ambiguity is deliberately created and maintained to the end. It gives the short story a somewhat irritating flavour.

Lord Raingo may not be among the two or three greatest novels of Bennett. But I should rank it (with *Whom God Hath Joined)* immediately below the masterpieces.

It contains a sentimental plot which is original, perhaps distinguished in some parts, but is not by any means responsible for the greatness of the novel. It has however some autobiographical aspects which the critic cannot altogether ignore. The names of Lord Rhondda and other politicians have sometimes been mentioned in connection with the main element in that plot—Raingo's friendship for Delphine. But we know that at the time Bennett was himself in the midst of a semi-secret liaison in which—like his hero—he found romance and happiness. We can take it that he supplied much of the amorous atmosphere of the book from his own experience. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that he places in the mouth of a minor character—Mrs. Blacklow—the very words spoken by Dorothy Cheston in similar circumstances and recorded in the *Journals.*[1] But the love-story between Raingo's son, Geoffrey, and Delphine's sister is forced and uninteresting. Even Delphine's character with her external calm and careless indifference concealing a morbid tendency to melancholy and hysteria is hardly convincing. Probably the most interesting figure in the "private" side of Raingo's life is that of his wife Adela. In the picture of this selfish patrician, unable and unwilling to understand her husband, childish (her mind "has not developed since she was

[1] III, p. 107.

eighteen"[1] and is "continually darting to and fro"[2]), incapable of running a home, unpunctual, badly dressed and a perfect snob, but, with all that, having unexpected dignity, active and possessed of undeniable "authority"[3]—the novelist has produced a highly individualized character—thoroughly unpleasant, yet not contemptible. Our last sight of her—dead under the wrecked car with the head-lights burning on like funeral taperal—is unforgettable. She is probably the one woman in *Raingo* that we do remember.

It is with the "public" life of Raingo that the critic is chiefly concerned. The novel will always be of interest mainly as a satirical and realistic study. Bennett had already been attracted to this kind of theme. As early as 1894 he had composed a "political skit" which caused one of his friends to describe the author as "the scorpion sting of cabinet ministers". *The Statue,* as we have seen[4] may in a way be considered as a first draft of *Raingo* in its political scenes. But it is to *Raingo* what *The Grand Babylon* is to *Imperial Palace.* Bennett had to collect first-hand experience of the milieu he wanted to describe before he could sit down to a really serious piece of work. It is interesting to note that he acquired this experience at two very different stages of his life. First in 1918 when he was Director at the Ministry of Information under Lord Beaverbrook. It suffices to read *A Canadian Banquet* and chiefly *The Greatest Moment* in *Things that have Interested Me*[5] to realize that some of the best things in the book were observed and duly registered at

[1] p. 91-
[2] p.9.
[3] p. 51.
[4] p. 85.
[5] I, p. 192 and III, p. 17.

this period. All these delightful traits (Trumbull's lectures on gardens, Raingo ordering generals about, his relations with the War Office, etc.) are connected with the inside organization of a Ministry which he of course had been able to study at leisure. It should also be noted that he was at the time obsessed by the way in which "honours" and "titles" were being conferred, as his play, *The Title,* performed in 1918, well shows. But it is remarkable that he did not then attempt to write *Raingo,* that he did not even, as it seems, conceive the novel. He only knew the skirts or fringe of his subjects. He had not yet probed the core—the mind of politicians—which of course was not of easy access. But in 1923, with his ripening friendship for Lord Beaverbrook, came an opportunity. We know that he was on several occasions invited to Cherkley and that there he met Austen Chamberlain, Lord Birkenhead, Mr. Churchill and Mr. Lloyd George as well as Bonar Law[1]. Moreover, Lord Beaverbrook was ever ready, in the course of private conversations, to supply him with the information he needed, and even undertook to revise the "political" parts of his book,[2] observing, in the very words of Andy Clyth, that he was showing him "hell with the lid off"[3]; to these opportunities Bennett was indebted for some of the most strikingly realistic pages of his novel.

His ministers form indeed a fine and life-like gallery of portraits: Lord Ockleford, urbane and majestic, Sid Jenkins, genial and slangy, Hasper Clews, shy and melancholy, the Colonial Premier in military uniform. It is easy to detect

[1] ***Letters to His Nephew,* pp. 99 and 109.**
[2] ***Journals,* III, p. 108.**
[3] ***Letters to His Nephew,* p. 109.**

connections with each of these and well known political figures. With Tom Hogarth Mr. Winston Churchill spontaneously identified himself.[1] Andy Clyth, the Prime Minister, is a subtle, frank, almost cynical though not unsympathetic picture. With the two strains in his nature, Scotch and Irish, Bennett cleverly connects the various aspects of his personality: his energy, love of power and dictatorial instincts, his envy, his puritanical leanings on the one hand; on the other, his charm and wizardry, his silvern voice and gift of oratory, his insincerity, his cynicism, his theatricality, his indolence, and moments of deep-lying mysticism.

But though Raingo is full of admirable character studies, though it contains scenes of pure comedy (such as Raingo pleading his weak heart to obtain a peerage) which are not unworthy of Moliere; though it can also boast of brilliant passages of devastating satire (Raingo refusing to receive a salary, the Induction, etc.) it lives as a novel chiefly, if not solely, through the character of the protagonist himself. The autobiographical element is here paramount. Raingo's situation and entanglements may have been borrowed from various politicians; some aspects of his personality or his career (his connection with the Press, etc.) may have been added from other sources; the fact remains that Raingo is pre-eminently Bennett—the real Bennett, both what he was and wanted to be—and this fact gives admirable life and unity to the picture. No other character in the novels is fullet of infectious energy and gusto. Physically he is middle sized with a tendency to stoutness and a desire to be slim; remarkable for his ties, and assuming a military carriage.

[1] *Journals,* III, p. 175.

On the moral side, what a fine animal; realistic, cynical, proud, with a genius for chicane, a passion for organization (he "organizes" even his wife's funeral!) and an indomitable instinct to fight; but also, and this is the other side of the picture, shy, nervous, a poor speaker, mystical to the point of superstition and credulity, and childishly romantic. "It was a wonderful moment" when he got the station-master to stop the train on purpose for him by [6]howing the telegram he had received from the Prime Minister. Full of naive, excited pride. A schoolboy. Nay, a very "school-girl".[1] A true conqueror, plucky though shy, high-strained and calculating, enthusiastic yet cool-headed. Beside him Meredith's Victor Radnor fades to the limbo of flagrant unrealities. His white waistcoat is no match for Raingo's tie. His successes in business and politics, even his fortune become improbable, problematic. For Meredith is no Radnor or rather Radnor is too like Meredith. But in Raingo the autobiographical element is no obstacle. He is, if not all that Bennett was, at least all he would have wished to be: politician, minister, press magnate, publicity expert, hotel proprietor, owner of big stores—a fighter and a dreamer. He is the Card de-localized. He is the ideal Bennett.

The conception of most of Bennett's great novels *(The Old Wives Tale, Raingo and* even *Riceyman Steps)* can be traced back through various stages or half-hearted attempts to an early period which is sometimes separated by several years from the time of actual composition. This remark applies pre-eminently to *Imperial Palace*. By the beginning of 1927 he had made up his mind to write a "big" novel

[1]p- 74.

about hotels—serious, this time.[1] Only three years before he had "been taken all over the secret parts of the Savoy Hotel[2] and we can safely admit that the germ of the "big" novel was already deposited in his mind. In fact, it had always been there. It is scarcely an exaggeration to state that hotels and big shops seem to have been an inborn idea with Bennett. "The fact was that he was always strongly attracted by the spectacle of the organization of any large commercial establishment and he considered that, in this respect, department stores were the nearest rivals of the big hotels".[3] These words which might serve as an epigraph to *Imperial Palace* are profoundly true not only of the hero but of the author. As early as 1911 Bennett was writing in exactly the same key "I have ever been a devotee of hotels and once indeed wrote a whole book about one. My secret ambition has always been to be the manager of a Grand Hotel".[4] The connection between *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1904) and *Imperial Palace* is indeed obvious and will have again to be referred to. But the evidence of Bennett's keen interest in the possibilities of the big hotel from the practical and literary points of view is evidenced by scores of references scattered throughout his novels *(Sacred and Profane Love, The Regent, Buried Alive,* etc.)—sometimes in the most unexpected places. "Hotels! There'll be more money and more fun to be got out of Hotels soon than of any other kind of enterprise in the world!" exclaims George Cannon in *Hilda Lessways.*[5] Here is struck the old

[1]***Letters to His Nephew,* p. 187.**
[2]**Ib., p. 115.**
[3]***Imperial Palace,* Chap. LVIII.**
[4]***Those United States,* p. 117.**
[5]**P. 734.**

familiar note of "fun and money", so common in *The Card* who delights, as many of Bennett's heroes, in making money in a way which is not only interesting but an actual source of genuine amusement. However his interest in the hotels seems to have sprung from deeper and mc,re disinterested motives. In *The Big Shop*[1] he strove to demonstrate that Big Stores (and of course Hotels) were "a tonic and stirrer of imagination", that they contained as much poetry as "the marts of old—Tyre, Sidon, Rome, Venice". But it is to *Paris Nights* that we must turn if we want to find in its extreme form Bennett's aesthetic vision of the modern hotel. The section entitled *Switzerland* and dated 1909-1911 is a slender collection of notes (about twenty pages) purporting to establish, with special reference to Swiss scenery, that the big modern hotel far from spoiling the beauty of a landscape completes and enhances it as well as ruins or ancient architecture. Before we pass judgment on "the hotel on the landscape" pleads Bennett "we must imaginatively realise what it is and what it means". With the help of imagination and a little training we may see in it not a desecration, but a consecration. "I saw it in the mass, rising in an immense irregular rectangle out of a floor of snow and a background of pines and firs. Its details had vanished. What I saw was not a series of parts, but the whole hotel as one organism and entity. Only its eight floors were indicated by illuminated windows, and behind those windows I seemed to have a mysterious sense of its lifts continually ascending and descending. The apparition was impressive, poetic, almost overwhelming. It was of a piece with the mountains. It had simplicity, severity, grandeur. It was indubitably and mov-

[2]***Things that have Interested Me,* III, p. 217.**

ingly beautiful." Thus can we learn to "observe sympathetically the physiognomy of grand hotels, and to discover a new source of aesthetic pleasure". We are at once reminded of those passages of the novel in which Bennett endeavours to convey the "romance" and the "beauty" of some aspects of the Imperial Palace at certain privileged hours. These early notes contain something of the aesthetics round which the whole book was built up.

They amply suffice at any rate to illustrate the keen and life-long interest which Bennett took in this special form of modern civilization which has so often been criticized or denounced both for its pretensions to luxury and its size—the expensive "palace" hotel. If Bennett did not write earlier a "big serious novel" on this subject the reason is that with the *Grand Babylon* shocker he had made it difficult for himself to attempt at once the same theme in a different key. He had shot his bolt too soon. But with the development of touristic activities after the Armistice, and especially when the films and a number of contemporary novels had created a literary interest in the "Grand Hotel" Bennett was in honour bound to give a worthy expression of the theme which had so long haunted him and of which he was a true pioneer. In one year (September 1929-July 1930) he wrote *Imperial Palace.*

For the true hero of the novel is the Hotel itself; everything is made subordinate to it. The plot is conceived so as to display in the most natural but also in the most exhaustive manner the various sides of the many activities in the life of the huge concern. The general manager and vice-president of the board of the Hotel (Evelyn Orcham) takes the daughter of a millionaire and the millionaire himself round

the wonders of the Imperial Palace, which gives opportunities for the description of the Hotel at 4 a.m., the Smithfield market, and the kitchens of the restaurant. The millionaire's daughter, having served her purpose, withdraws temporarily to Paris and leaves Evelyn free to attend an important meeting of shareholders and negotiate successfully a merger which increases his means of action without diminishing his influence; the financial secrets of hotel organization are thus revealed. Meanwhile Evelyn takes an interest in one of his employees, Violet Powler, who is removed from the Laundry department to the exalted position of housekeeper and is first taken round the place by the "panjandrum" himself who discloses to her (and to us) the inner mysteries or "bowels" of the hotel. Here occurs an incident which is treated at length and seems to carry us away from the hotel world: Gracie lures Evelyn to Paris and to her flat where he is vilely seduced. The episode is treated with remarkable subtlety and insidious sensuousness. But in fact it is only a pretext for a further display of Imperial Palace scenes. While indulging his liaison in Paris Orcham has been guilty of neglecting his hotel where things have gone from bad to worse: the manager of the Grill Room has disappeared, the chief housekeeper is ill, etc.; the whole place is disorganized. However, he soon puts everything to rights after a series of technical and picturesque scenes in which he again shows his mastery over both the guests and the staff. And he finally marries Violet Powler, the housekeeper, as, contrary to Gracie who would have been a liability, she has proved an asset in the running of the hotel.

The characters as well as the plot are meant to fit in with the general conception. Bennett boasts that there are as

many as eighty-five, though 1 can make out only about forty that are delineated with some care and precision. The power required for this act of creation is remarkable. But the great majority of these characters: Long Sam the porter, Craddock the meat-buyer, MacLaren and O'Riordan the "housekeepers, Oldham the valet, Adolphe the receptionist, Maddix the cocktail-mixer, Planquet the chef, Plimsing the detective, Immerson the publicity agent, Cousin the manager, etc., only exist through and for their duties in the big hotel organization. They are individualized by their functions, and are chiefly meant to display or illustrate them. In fact there are only four characters in the novel. Sir Henry Savott and Gracie are a legacy of the *Grand Babylon,* Sir Henry being a scarcely modified version of Theodore Racksole; but Nella Racksole is only a very rough copy of Gracie. In the picture of this capricious unscrupulous patrician Bennett has introduced some new touches supplied by his wider experience and the change brought in human psychology by thirty years of unprecedented progress and world transformation. There is something of "the woman who stole everything" and also of Lady Queenie Paulle in Gracie. But she is subtler, more feminine and glowingly sensuous, more expert in the art of attracting and holding off the male; perhaps a mystic at heart unless she merely happens to be a blue-stocking; on the whole frankly unpleasant. One cannot say she is a gold digger since she owns colossal wealth; Donna Juana, Evelyn dubs her after some intimate acquaintance, and this sounds a pretty good description of her; but on the whole I prefer that of Jack Craddock, the meat-buyer—a fine morsel but "a bit too tasty".

Violet Powler is a business woman, without education, but endowed with intelligence, energy, concealed charm and sensuousness. She is a kind of glorified Alice Challice. Evelyn is the one original creation in the way of characters. This son of a Customs Inspector after an early marriage which proved brief and unhappy has managed to rise to the top of his profession and to reach the age of forty-seven without any real sentimental experience: his relation to the staff and customers, his entire devotion to the hotel have induced in him a habit of continual repression which is not unknown to readers of Bennett's novels. He has never been in a pub in his life. He is cold, dignified, shy and respectable like a perfect butler. He is of course clever and astute at need. He is one fourth Denry Machin and three fourths Edwin Clayhanger. But essentially a bourgeois, living in a rut of efficiency and respectability. Will Gracie succeed in striking from this flint a spark of passion, a flame of physical love? For one moment only; the fire will soon moulder back to warmish ashes.

If the plot and even some of the characters recall the *Grand Babylon Hotel* the relation of the technique is to *The Old Wives' Tale*. With indefatigable patience and endless pains Bennett has undertaken to display the life of the great bee-hive, sometimes in its most minute details. The energy which in *The Old Wives' Tale* was used to embrace a long period of time is here expended over a large space and a multiplicity of characters. Bennett succeeds as no one had before him in revealing to us the humour of hotel life (Mrs. Harbour's disapproval of the Rajah's harem), its luxury (Volivia), its technical perfection (Laundry), itspicturesque-ness (Bowels, Smithfield), its tragedy (Crime, Tessa), even

its poetry and beauty. Bennett has indeed tried hard and on more than one occasion succeeded in translating the aesthetics of *Paris Nights* into words and facts; he has endowed with beauty some of the most technical descriptions of his novel: the hotel at 4 a.m., the electric lamps burning "with the stoical endurance of organisms which have passed beyond time into eternity", while the great hall "seems to lit under an enchantment"; the vision of the nun among the carcasses of Smithfield "hands joined in front, eyes downcast, a strange, exotic visitant from another sphere"; Planquet coming back from his "enormous open fire" with a jolly smile, "as cool as an explorer returning from the Arctic zone"—to such scenes the word poetry can rightly be applied, as the word poet to the mind who caught and found words for his vision of them.

For all that, it may well be asked whether the theme was worth so much labour, so much industry, so much talent—whether even genuine flashes of genius can raise it to the standard of highest literature. In *Imperial Palace* Bennett has set the words of the *Grand Babylon* libretto to the mighty music of *The Old Wives' Tale*. But the music cannot entirely obHterate the words. In *The Old Wives' Tale* through the meanest details of everyday life, we could detect the struggle of beauty and age going on, we could feel the beating of the pulse of time. The average reader cannot help realizing that the Imperial Palace is a highly restricted and artificial world with which he has little in common. He is not even certain, notwithstanding Bennett's efforts, that it *is* a romantic and interesting world. Sometimes perhaps, at rare moments of the night, like most other centres of human activity. But not otherwise. Let us grant that Evelyn is

something more than a glorified butler, that he is an artistic genius, that, in spite of his forty-seven years of age, he can, to a girl like Grade, appear a romantic hero. But what of his subordinates? Are not his housekeepers (of whom we hear so much, too much) fussy busybodies and minxes? Is not Cousin a clockwork machine? Ceria, a good-looking idiot? In spite of the atmosphere of luxury, and of the outwardly decorous or refined deportment of all'and sundry members of the staff, is not the sordidly vulgar, intensely commercial outlook visible even through Bennett's enthusiastic pages? He writes somewhere of the little Parisian restaurant where Grade and Evelyn had their meal that "the scene was squalid enough, until you regarded it as romantic when it ceased to be anything else but romantic".[1] The same might be said of the Imperial Palace: if you do not (or cannot) regard it as romantic, the scene is squalid enough.

But to Bennett it was and remained highly romantic. He could imagine no worthier theme, he could indulge no brighter vision. "His secret ambition had always been to be the manager of a grand hotel". He decided to realize it before he died, even though he died of it. For Evelyn is not the real manager of the hotel; the panjandrum is no panjandrum at all; he has to take his orders from somebody else like Cousin and Ceria and all the others; Bennett is the permanent self-appointed director of this bright, gilded, complicated machinery which he delighted in creating.

[1]Chap. LV, III.

VIII

BY-PRODUCTS

OF the twenty odd plays written by Arnold Bennett alone or in collaboration, four at least can strictly be described as by-products: *Cupid and Common Sense* (1908), *The Great Adventure* (1913), *Sacred and Profane Love* (1919), *Mr. Prohack* (1927)[1] are nothing but adaptations of novels which at the time when they were prepared for the stage had, directly or indirectly, secured a considerable amount of reputation. They were an extension or a development of the original success in another sphere.

These plays can be dealt with in a few words. They are very different from the novels, but the differences are not on the whole fortunate. The reader experiences a sense of deep disappointment: they seem coarse and artificial. The wealth of significant details unobtrusively introduced in the course of the narratives, the exquisite dovetailing of incidents and subtle psychological uncertainties disappear or are simplified in the extreme. In *The Great Adventure* for instance Janet (Alice) comes to the house where Farll's valet has just died, instead of meeting her correspondent outside Maskelyne's Theatre; she hears of her husband's alleged bigamy *after* his real identity has been established,

[1]The first two being stage-versions of *Anna of the Five Towns* and *Buried Alive*. *Riceyman Steps* was also dramatized and performed but Bennett had nothing to do with the stage version.

which renders her meek acceptance of the fact commonplace and insignificant. It would be idle to quarrel with many obvious impoverishments, as severe concentration was needed to bring the novel to the stage. Yet one cannot help feeling that the process has been somewhat brutally or unnecessarily carried out. Similarly, the change in the titles is not always fortunate: one feels in the alteration an obvious desire to catch the public fancy at any cost, and nettle curiosity. The same might be said of the names of characters which in the plays sometimes become purely farcical: to alter Alice Challice to the ridiculous Janet Cannot is to be guilty of a serious fault in taste, an actual breach of manners. The trouble is that Bennett had a very low conception of the aesthetics of the stage, as we shall have occasion to point out.

In this process of dramatic simplification some all-important incidents are omitted which should never have been allowed to disappear: two good instances from *The Great Adventure* are the burial scene at Westminster which is altogether cancelled and the Dickensian trial at the end which is replaced by a friendly discussion in Lord Alcar's library. Producers should perhaps bear the blame for this, but Bennett ought not to have yielded. Their timidity is no excuse for his. More serious still, in the same order of ideas, is the softening down of certain episodes (Diaz in *Cupid and Common Sense* is no longer a drunkard but a drug-addict—the presentment of this vice on the stage being I suppose more refined) and the adjunction of intolerable "happy endings" which destroy the beauty and the atmosphere of the novels: thus in *Cupid and Common Sense* Willie Beach (Price) instead of committing suicide comes

back from America as the fatuous husband of an heiress and is held up to ridicule, which modifies the very psychological basis as the contrast gives Ralph Emery (Henry Mynors) a moral superiority which he was far from possessing in the novel. These changes are timid concessions to the public taste and no excuse can be found for them.

At the same time it must be admitted that some scenes are very neatly translated into the dramatic form. The first two acts *of Cupid and Common Sense,* especially the second which at times makes one think of Becque's *Les Corbeaux,* are strangely effective; also the second scene in *Sacred and Profane Love* is an improvement on the novel. The style is clear, direct, especially suited to dramatic effects. Of the four plays *Mr. Prohack* has probably least suffered, as the original novel was, to begin with, light, unreal and distinctly intellectual.

Among the remaining plays *Milestones*[1] stands apart. It knew commercial as well as literary success and, as we are informed by the author, earned .£150,000 for the Royalty Theatre. It would seem to be the high dramatic achievement which for so many years Bennett had been longing to attain—a monument rather than a milestone on the road to stage fame. However, on looking at it more closely, it may be said that *Milestones* also is a by-product, though of infinitely more refined and original a nature than the plays which have just been reviewed. It is a transposition of the spirit—though not of the letter—of *The Old Wives' Tale*—or at least an attempt at working out for the stage something of the inspiration of the great novel.

[1]It was started (as *The Family)* on 13 August 1911, and finished on the 24th. It was first produced in London in March 1912 and published in the same month. The play was written in collaboration with Edward Knoblock.

The play opens in 1860 and closes in 1912—very much as the Baines narrative. In it the story of the struggle between the old and the new orders of things is told as effectively and forcibly as in *The Old Wives* Tale,* while of course it must be admitted that discontinuity has been substituted for the adamantine continuity of time which gives the book its power. It would be absurd to press the parallel too far. There are obvious differences between the novel and the play. In *Milestones* the emphasis is laid on the conflict between the three different generations over the questions of money and marriage which are not by any means prominent in *The Old Wives' Tale;* the tyranny exhibited by parents and the impassioned revolt of some of the children is rather reminiscent of *Clay hanger.* Moreover there is a democratic, "progress of the species" atmosphere about the play which is entirely foreign to *The Old Wives' Tale.* With obvious glee the author proclaims and proves that the self-made men (Preece and Richard) are the real forces of the modern world; that old privileges must give way and that the "aristocratic racket is played out".[1] Indeed his satire of aristocracy in the last act is somewhat forced and conventional. There occur, here and there, typical Shavian touches (as for instance the remark on England's attitude to genius[2]). The whole play is steeped in a Shavian, Fabian atmosphere.

Again the tone of *The Old Wives' Tale* is intensely serious, purposely ponderous and implacably dull. But *Milestones^* though highly tragical at times, is witty, brilliant, flippant, with occasional flashes of humour which are more akin to

[1]Act III.
[2]Act II. "Geniuses have to be kept in order, like criminals, etc."

Wilde than to Shaw. Bennett and his collaborator cleverly manage most of these effects by a dexterous use of the historical perspective: sometimes the characters suggest as wild or absurd anticipations things that have now become everyday realities ("flying machines"); more often they exalt as latest discoveries or daring innovations things which have now grown commonplace or have even been superseded (bathrooms, typists, iron ships, etc.). These details combined with topical references to some of the picturesque facts of the periods (feminine fashion, the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy, the Rifle Volunteers, the vogue of Ouida and the bicycle, William Morris lecturing in his stable, etc.) contribute to keep up the standard of interest and amusement. But in *The Old Wives' Tale* Bennett had scarcely had recourse to such effects which of course might easily have been introduced.

The central theme is however the same in both works.[1] It is the subtle, truly admirable picture of the changes worked by the lapse of years on the main characters which lifts *Milestones* over the mediocrity of the other plays. John Rhead from an energetic far-seeing business man develops into a tyrannical father and a champion of old-fashioned methods; Samuel Sibley from a narrow timorous young man, into a benignant broad-minded idler; Emily Rhead from a noble impassioned nature, into a snob and social schemer; Gertrude from a fiery romantic, into an acid spinster; Arthur Preece from an apostle of the socialist faith, into a disillusioned sceptic. True the change is

[1] Mr. R. A. Scott-James is, I believe, the only critic to have made this important point in the chapter devoted to Bennett in his *Personality in Literature* (Seeker, 1913), p. 174.

not so pathetic as in *The Old Wives' Tale* where the victim is feminine grace and beauty crushed in the slow implacable jaws of time. But some of the stage directions read almost as pathetic as the well-known pages at the end of the novel:

> Rose and John have both grown very old, Rose being seventy-three and John seventy-seven. Rose has become short-sighted, white haired and stoutish. John has grown a little deaf; his hair is thin, his eyes sunken, his complexion of wax, his features sharply defined. Gertrude follows them, now seventy-three. She has grown into a thin, shrivelled old woman, erect, hard, with a high, shrill voice and keen clear eyes.

We are reminded of Constance trudging on her way to record her vote against Federation. The realization, through the power of the stage, could be made almost as direct and overwhelming.

In this lies the secret of the comparative greatness of *Milestones*. It has the originality of presenting within the narrow compass of the stage the chief episodes of the life of a family spreading over three generations and closely linked with the great national events of the time—a valuable hint which Mr. Coward (followed by others) fully worked out in *Cavalcade*. But the germ of this conception is contained in *The Old Wives' Tale* and this realization is but a fresh proof of the originality and vitality of the novel.

What the Public Wants (1909), *The Title* (1918) and *London Life* (1924) are plays of social and political satire and should be read in connection with *The Statue* and *Lord Raingo*. The first, despite its early date, is by far the best and contains at the beginning some capital scenes. The satire of the sensational press has not aged at all and seems as

pointed and up to date as if it had been written yesterday. Bennett's intimate knowledge of the journalistic world comes up to best advantage in the opening speeches. The mere list of the religious papers owned and edited by Sir Charles Worgan reads like a consummate parody which only an expert could have contrived: *Sabbath Chimes, The Sunday Comrade, The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Record, Sunday Tales, The Sunday School Teacher 's Friend, Golden Words.* The explanation of Sir Charles' methods is masterly and expressed with much epigrammatic force. *The Daily Mercury* "whips up events to the required standard of interest". In fact, "it reads like bread and jam without the bread". It has one stock epithet: "amazing". It succeeds in making the least promising topic exciting. Its editor masterly alters the clumsy title "Are we growing less spiritual?" which heads an article on religion to "Ought curates to receive presents from lady parishioners?" The ethics of the case are presented in the very title of the play. "I've only got one principle", argues Sir Charles. "Give the public what it wants. Don't give the public what you think it ought to want, or what you think would be good for it; but what it actually does want. . . I'm told I pander to the passions of the public. I call it supplying a legitimate demand. When you've been to the barber to be shaved, do you round on him for pandering to your passions ... I'm a manufacturer, just like the fellows that sell soap and flannel; only a damned sight more honest_"[1] Of course Bennett sides with the Francis and Johns of the play against Sir Charles who in the end is spurned and deserted by the woman he loves and **the** very members of his family. **But**

[1] ActI.

his dicta are strikingly similar to the views held by Bennett himself in *The Truth about an Author* and elsewhere ("An author is the same thing as a grocer or a duke") and we suspect him of a sneaking sympathy for this commercial position. At any rate, as was the case with Tom Knight and Henry Shakespeare in *A Great Man,* he holds the balance even between the two sides of his own nature. The satire of the theatrical world contained in the second ?ct is weaker, and the end is far too like a "play with a purpose" on the approved lines laid by Brieux, whom Bennett bitterly criticized but who certainly had no little influence on his early dramatic development. But the first act is excellent and should suffice to save the play from the oblivion which now seems its fate.

The Title cannot pretend to such power either in conception or in style. The dialogue is marred by far fetched epigrams after the worse manner of Wilde ("A cause is like Champagne or high heels, and one must be prepared to suffer for it," etc.). The play was written in 1918 when there was much feeling in the country about the composition of the Honours List. But it is not so much a satire of political corruption (though there are here and there some scathing passages) as a satire of feminine snobbery in connection with the granting of titles: Mr. Culver's wife and secretary are ready to desert him if he carries out his (somewhat vague) intention of declining the title which has been offered to him.

London Life has one effective scene in the first act in which a usurer, on being suddenly confronted by an expert lawyer, loses his arrogance and is intimidated into accepting a reasonable settlement of his debt: it is in the best tradition

of Becque. But the rest of the play, with its pictures of political and financial corruption, and its occasional remarks on the Jewish race, is strangely pointless and inconclusive.

The remaining published plays may be passed over quite briefly. It is remarkable that the very early *Polite Farces*[1] still read fresh and amusing. *The Step-Mother* in particular is an excellent caricature of the famous lady novelist which reappears in *'Sacred and Profane Love* and in *The Honeymoon*. The latter play (1911) has an original situation (owing to a mystification a ceremony of marriage turns out to be null and void so that the parties concerned have time to reconsider the matter and the lady changes her mind) which however reminds one of Shaw's *Getting Married*. *Body and Soul* (1922) is an altogether incredible story which centres round an alleged transfer of personalities. *The Love Match* (1922) is a rough sketch of *The Woman who Stole Everything*. *The Bright Island* (1924) seems a feeble attempt at political satire not unlike Shaw's *Apple Cart*. But two plays of a totally different type deserve a brief mention: *Don Juan de Marana*[2] and *Judith* (1919) are attempts in the romantic presentment of historical legend. There is power and occasional subtlety in the sensuous descriptions of these two plays and in the very conception of the scene ("general effect of splendidly attired groups in brilliant illumination against a simple background beneath the heavy mysterious

[1]*The Step-Mother, A Question of Sex, A Good Woman.* They were published in 1899 at the request of a publisher who wanted a book of 'polite farces" which could be acted in a drawing-room with a minimum of requisites:

"For myself I have dispensed with the trestles, the boards and the passion____. The only apparatus necessary is ordinary existence, ordinary furniture and a single door for entrance and exit." (Preface.)

Published in 1923 but composed in 1912.

shadows above them"). But the handling of biblical diction *in Judith* is intolerably burlesque and *Don Juan* continually verges on the melodramatic ("I am as sincere as death itself" . . . "You are lost but I will love you in hell," etc.). These two plays, with *Sacred and Profane Love,* are the extreme limits of Bennett's excursions into purely romantic literature.

What he lacked to produce the dramatic[1] masterpiece which he so longed to achieve was a sufficiently high notion of drama itself. "My aim in writing plays whether alone or in collaboration has always been strictly commercial." It is true that he later qualified this statement by adding that, after *Cupid and Common Sense,* all his plays were written "for artistic pleasure". Yet we know that he never lavished much labour on them. They were mostly written within two or three weeks. "I would sooner write two plays than a novel; the technique is crude; the emotional strain lower". It is strange that this so patient artist where the novel was concerned should have entertained such a notion of dramatic art. The peculiar importance of technical effects in the drama blinded him to the necessity of literary excellence. His best novels he handled ignominiously when he adapted them for the stage. Thus it is that, with all his exceptional qualifications for the task, he left us merely one original play—*Milestones*—and a fragment of powerful satire—*What the Public Wants*.

Bennett classified under the heading "Belles Lettres" all his non-fictional or non-dramatic works. If somewhat vague the name is convenient and unpretentious. But it has the disadvantage of including books of the most heterogeneous characters such as literary criticism, impressions

of travel, miscellaneous essays, and those extraordinary "pocket philosophies" for which I can find no other name than that attributed to them by the author, or at least by the publisher with his consent. It may be thought unfair to treat Bennett as a philosopher and he would probably (save perhaps at the very end of his career, in his "savour of life" moods) have disclaimed such an appellation. In 1920 he wrote with disarming humility "As for method, I have none. I am entirely incapable of organized research. I adore particulars . . . I have no exact knowledge on any subject whatsoever".[1]

We find indeed no systematic exposition of general ideas in any of his works. The pamphlet entitled *Liberty: A statement of the British case"* (1914) is a superficial piece of journalism, purporting to review the events which culminated in the world war. We gather from a number of odd articles or utterances[2] as well as from the general trend of his work that he was an agnostic who believed in evolution and in human perfectibility: "My dogma is that, in its broadest aspect, the movement of evolution is from something worse to something better". Spencer, Lyell and Darwin he lavishly quotes throughout his works, and he consistently gave himself as an optimist. One side of his beliefs he was however never tired of emphasizing: the negative or anti-religious side. "I myself never felt within me the operation of a religious instinct," he wrote in *The Religious Interregnum,* and, in *My Religious Experience,* he

[1]*Our Women,* pp. 9-10.
[2]*Things that have Interested Me;* I (Sunday Theatres, Rops, **The** League of Nations) III (The Passing of the Puritans, My Religious Experience); *The Savour of Life* (Einstein for the tired); *The Religious Interregnum* (1929).

states that he "very soon became indifferent to all the forms and rites of dogmatic religion" owing chiefly to "the cautious, agnostic and self-sufficient bent" of his mind. The widest moral, religious and intellectual toleration was with him a natural consequence of this general attitude. Politically, as is well known, he had always been a socialist.

All this is perhaps clear and definite but does rot constitute a very precise claim to originality as a thinker. What Arnold Bennett termed his "philosophies" is a curious collection of about a dozen books to which the word "practical psychology" should more accurately be applied. They can be divided into two quite distinct groups.

The first includes *The Reasonable Life* (1907)[1], *How to live on* 24 *hours a day* (1907), *The Human Machine* (1908) and *Self and Self Management* (1918). They alone were specifically described as "philosophies". They are in fact collections of short articles emphasizing the possibility and the necessity for each individual to discipline his mind in order to achieve worldly success. "Big, strong vital thinking is contained in these pages—thoughts that make a man reach up to his highest self. For many a reader a chance encounter with this book may be the first step on the road to success". Thus runs the jacket of one of these "philosophies" which displays the additional incentive of a singularly repulsive picture of the author as an embodiment of that wordly success which is proffered to the reader. Well may we believe that the sale of these volumes was important and that they were the cause of an extraordinary voluminous correspondence, as Bennett boasted in a some-

[1]Reprinted in 1912 as *Mental Efficiency*.

what ineffective reply to the charge of "pot-boiling".[1] It is enough to promise a definite practical result—whether the cure of physical ailments, charms, talismans or racing tips—to obtain the possibility of large commercial success. What is remarkable is that Bennett wrote these books (with the exception of the last which is almost empty of any definite ideas or principles) before he himself had become really famous. He was in the position of the tattered mountebank who offers to sell for a shilling the magic stone which transmutes lead into gold. As soon as he had actually become a very successful man, the "philosophies" stopped. He had no longer any secret to impart, though fresh editions of the old manuals appeared in profusion.

The gist of the philosopher's teaching is this: we should both learn to study and to despise our mind. The mind is "but an exterior instrument like the tongue or foot"; its muscles can be trained and developed by appropriate gymnastics. Or rather the brain is a machine which should be kept well oiled and fed with the right fuel but which is purely material and from which we can demand without pity or relaxation the maximum output for an almost continuous period of time. We must learn to control the mind; we can tyrannize over it; as a matter of fact we should never leave it "idle, undirected, masterless, to play at random like a child in the streets after dark". By a due amount of concentration we can secure a full control of our mind. We should not say "give us more brains, God" exclaims Bennett, sadly misquoting Meredith, but rather "give us power to keep in order what brains we have". Thus will each man be able to say every morning as he rises "I am the

[1] *The Savour of Life*. Preface.

master of my brain!" One could muster endless objections to such a proposition. The mind of the artist in particular finds its most refined and powerful inspirations in moments of apparent idleness; but not only the mind of the artist; in almost any profession a process of mental relaxation is necessary to recruit the minimum of intellectual freshness and initiative which is indispensable to the carrying on of any form of human activity, commercial *on* otherwise. Bennetts theory is the mistaken notion of an overworked journalist suffering from chronic insomnia. It is however interesting to note the extreme rational position taken by Bennett in matters of literary production. He is at the antipodes of the surrealist tendencies which urge that the free unhampered almost unconscious activity of the mind can alone produce literature of human value and interest.

But it is not necessary to have recourse to such elaborate arguments to expose the inanity of Bennett's system. His belief in the infinite capacity for work of the human mind may be very fine in theory; let us grant that the brain *is* such a machine. What difference does it make in practice? What practical means of controlling it does Bennett give us? And to what new tasks should we apply it to best advantage? The answer of the manuals is ridiculously inadequate. If you want to control your mind, to "get the last ounce of power out of the machine", you must "concentrate"; do not read papers in the trams or trains; keep always thinking about something; get up earlier in the morning; keep a diary (and consequently go to bed later at night); don't play tennis. And when you have thus acquired a marvellous instrument and plenty of leisure to use it, what can you do? Well, for instance, you may read *Aurora Leigh;* or for want of another

exercise, "why don't you walk out of your house door, in your slippers, to the nearest gas lamp of a night with a butterfly net, and observe the wild life of common and rare moths that is beating about it, and co-ordinate the knowledge thus obtained and build a superstructure on it, and at last get to *know* something about something?" No wonder the readers wrote and asked for supplementary information and advice. *

The second group includes works[1] which deal rather with the "art of living", the best way of avoiding unpleasantness in every day relations by means of psychological tact and understanding. Bennett recommends "an organized effort to increase happiness". His principles are not by any means as challenging as in the previous instances, and few will disagree with the advice he gives. The first requirement for a happy intercourse with our fellow-beings, urges Bennett characteristically, is imagination by which is meant a "sympathetic exercise of imagination" that is to say the capacity to "put oneself in another person's place". It is equally important not to judge or to rush to moral conclusions as to the doings of others. This, he claims, can very well be achieved by a stern exercise of the willpower. We can here recognize the attitude of the realistic novelist eager to suppress his own feelings so as to describe and interpret his characters without being disturbed by his own sentimental reactions. In brief you should "regard yourself as a free agent, and the others as puppets of determinism." These principles hold good as regards the all-important problem

[1]*The Feast of St. Friend,* 1911 (reprinted as *Friendship and Happiness); How to Make the Best of Life,* 1923; *The Plain Man and his Wife,* 1913; (reprinted as *Married Life,* 1916); *Our Women,* 1920. See also *Things that have Interested Me* and *The Savour of Life, passim.*

of the relations between man and woman, husband and wife. Here imagination, the power of conceiving oneself in another situation (in this case the situation of a creature belonging to another sex which makes it doubly difficult) is more than ever needed. Here too is the "suppression of moral indignation" highly desirable. In *Our Women*, as already noted, Bennett has given us a subtle picture of the development of a quarrel first from the man's, secondly from the woman's point of view, and shown us how the lack of these two qualities lead to catastrophes which imagination and will power can easily avoid. But even with these the everlasting "discord between the sexes" which is one of the fundamental antinomies of life can never be entirely eliminated. Nor is it desirable that it should. The duet must needs also be a duel; the sex-discord may be the most exasperating thing in existence, but it is by general agreement the most delightful and the most interesting".[1]

So much for married people; as for those who are not legally bound to each other, they cannot be too careful. Before doing anything rash every young man should "decide if he is ready for love"; he should place the girl to whom he is attracted in prosaic circumstances to see if his love will stand it; in fact (though Bennett does not say it) he should read Stendhal and realize that love is a process of successive crystallizations which may or may not be lasting. Just as there are marriages of reason, there should be "courtships-of reason".

All this is eminently sensible; perhaps too much so. The trouble is not that the ideal of life thus expressed with its petty recommendations about food, drink, sleep, house-

[1]*Our Women,* p. 4.

keeping, money, is terribly *bourgeois* and *terre-h-terre,* but rather that it is terribly evident. Bennett feels it and more than once apologizes for his "excursions into the obvious". "This is platitudes," he pleads, "but the value of platitudes is considerable." And he proceeds gravely to explain that one of the best means of "making the best oflife" is carefully to avoid worry. He could well be apologetic. One would not blame him for having written those articles when he courted publicity and needed money. There can be no excuse for his republishing them when he was a rich and famous man.

His autobiographical writings[1] have been studied elsewhere and it has been duly noted that they were conspicuous for their impartiality, for this "suppression of moral indignation" which he so dogmatically recommended. His impressions of travel are often fresher and more intimate than the entries in his private diaries. *Paris Nights* whiqh contains records of his stays in Paris, London, Italy, Nice and Monte-Carlo, Fontainebleau, Switzerland, the Midlands is probably the most remarkable of these. - The war impressions in *Over There* are somewhat didactic and emotional. *Those United States* betrays intense sympathy for American efficiency qualified by national pride and artistic scruples. *The Log of the Velsa* contains good descriptions of Holland; *Mediterranean Scenes* deals with the Near East; while *Things that have InterestedMe* (II and III) include vivid impressions of Portugal and Spain.

A man of wide experience and eminently wise in the conduct of most of his private affairs, it cannot be said that Bennett has succeeded in communicating the secret of his

[1] *The Truth about an Author, Journals, Letters.*

wisdom, or even merely his "gusto", his alleged keen enjoyment of life, to his readers. Charles Lamb or even such a practical failure as William Hazlitt were infinitely more successful. Bennett's essays are clever, well-worded, but dry, unconvincing, inconclusive. In his "philosophies" at any rate he reveals himself in a particularly sinister light. He is no Montaigne, he is no Bacon. A mongrel, a sort of Americanized cross between the two. Or even worse. He is guilty of "Irish developments" in which he cautiously juggles with platitudes and takes great care not to commit himself to definite opinions. His prose then reads like a good schoolboy's essay with an ambitious subject, a dearth of ideas and a desire to fill a set number of pages. At his best lucid and brilliantly sensible, Bennett has permanently ruined his claims as an essayist by publishing and republishing these very inferior pages.

One could not say the same of his position as a literary critic. It may not be one of the highest but it is secure and on the whole original. From the first he was a reviewer: "the first article I ever insinuated into a London daily was a review". For many years, between 1895 and 1900, in the columns of *Woman* and *The Academy* he was pre-eminently—if not solely—a reviewer. Moreover he was a good reviewer from the editorial point of view—a marked success in this branch of the profession. A. R. Orage wrote in an unpublished letter "As a contributor I found him admirable. He was prompt. His notes were always timely and bright and he never complained (as most contributors do) of the rest of the paper". One might almost be tempted to believe that Bennett was first and foremost a critic who for various reasons was attracted to fiction.

This view however would be entirely mistaken. Though he began with reviewing and never quite gave it up, Bennett's literary criticism is essentially a by-product in the sense that its weight and value are closely connected with his eminence as a novelist. It is about novels and authors of novels that he wrote his only important criticism; and this largely owing to his intimate knowledge of the imaginative and technical aspects of novel-writing.

This is well seen in his criticism of the drama, though he had practised play-writing and knew the world of the stage well. In his various articles on the subject[1] he reveals a close understanding of the conditions of the stage; he knows if the price of seats is or is not too high, if the rents of the houses are not excessive, if the managers are or are not out of pocket; he snubs the actors for their inaudible articulation, and the critics (in particular A. B. Walkley, his *bite noire,* who reminds one of his McQuoid in *What the Public Wants* and of his Mr. Ipple) for their mealy-mouthed criticism or supercilious effrontery. He can even occasionally give most merited censure to playwrights—as in the case of these grossly over-rated authors Brieux and Rostand—or pay a fine penetrating tribute to Becque; but on the whole his dramatic criticism is desultory and disappointing. The reason is that to him the technique of the stage was "crude and simple"; that plays were much easier to write than novels "because they are shorter and rely on the convincingness of the actors, while the novelist has to bear "a much more severe emotional strain". As has already been hinted it was this low, somewhat commercial conception of

[1]See chiefly *Books and Persons, The Authors Craft, Milestones* (Preface), *Things that have Interested Me* (II and III), *The Savour of Life.*

dramatic art which was probably responsible for his failure as a dramatist: this great realist would not take the trouble to write a realistic comedy. His value as a dramatic critic was similarly affected.

His criticism of critics is also very inadequate. While professing great admiration for the works of Bayle, Sainte-Beuve and Taine, he found that Hazlitt "though very readable" lacked learning and "grasp of life"— in brief that "he did not know enough". As for the contemporary critics of what he terms the "professional squad"[1] he dismisses them with amusing but highly unconvincing nonchalance. The fact of the matter is that in writing about fellow-critics he is obsessed by the alleged superiority of "the creative artist"; what they write "simply makes creative artists laugh".[2] How can those who merely *read* literature possibly judge those who *make* it? Only Swinburne for obvious reasons finds grace in his eyes.[3]

It is however his judgments of poetry which illustrate most fully his inability to criticize work other than novels. Of Wordsworth whom he professed to admire he has written to very little purpose that he was a "mixture of Milton and *Punch"* and that he, Bennett, read him as much for his "unconsciously funny lines" as for his purple passages. This view might probably have been amusingly developed, but the examples adduced by Bennett are strangely inadequate. On the death of Swinburne he wrote a colourful and even moving little essay. But it is full of wrong ideas and erroneous judgments. He claims that Swinburne was

[1]Saintsbury, Collins, Elton, Raleigh, Herford, Dowden.
[2]*Books and Persons*. The Profession,
[3]Ib., *Mallarme, Bazin, Swinburne.*

"no. Victorian" because he shocked some of his contemporaries; he urges that "he never connected art with any form of morals.... He sang. He sang supremely and that wasn't enough for the British PubHc"—thus making of Swinburne the strict disciple of Art for Art's sake theories that he never was, even in his preraphaelite hey-day. He reflects further that "if Putney ignored Swinburne, he ignored Putney. But there is great stuff in Putney for a poet and I marvel that Swinburne never perceived it and used it". We can here discover the root of Bennett's impotence in matters of poetry criticism. He is obsessed by the relation between public and author. The *Daily Mail* took hardly any notice of Swinburne's death. He "had written for fifty years and never once moved the nation save inimically" with *Poems and Ballads.* To Bennett's mind, there must have been something wrong either with the poet or the public. And he concludes that "he must have been born English and in the nineteenth century by accident". Indeed, Swinburne had not "studied his market", Bennett is blind to the fact that for a poet, at least for a poet of a certain type, it is a duty to shirk immediate understanding from a wide public, to cultivate a secret source of inspiration. Nor are we to wonder when we read elsewhere[1] that poetry of real merit is always disposed of easily "because there is absolutely no competition"; and that "the first duty of a poet is to keep his family and himself in decency".

In such pronouncements Bennett displays an unfortunate tendency to cheap rationalism and middle-class sensibility from which to say the truth he never was quite free. He reminds one at once of Dr. Johnson (or perhaps Jacob

[1] *How to Become an Author.*

Tonson of the *Dunciad),* M. Prudhomme and Clement Vautel. His wreath on Swinburne's grave is but a last well-meant effort of the poet's arch-enemy—the Philistines. But strangely enough these very defects become unimportant in his criticism of the novel, or, even, are turned to definite advantage. The commercial standpoint which is always marked in Bennett's critical writings is no such drawback in the case of a literary form which by its very rules depends on the appeal made on a wide pubhc. The patience and tenacity required for the writing of long realistic fiction is not incompatible with those methods of "clockwork composition" or with the "financial inducements" to which Bennett more than once refers with something like approval. After all, it should be remembered that poets are not always good critics of fiction. When Baudelaire wrote that "a poet always contains a critic" he meant "a critic of poetry" which simply means that a man should understand his trade. Bennett was of course a very incomplete critic. But this was partly because he knew his trade as a novelist so well. And it is precisely this expert knowledge which confers undeniable value to his work as a critic of fiction.

There is no doubt that to him the novel was the highest form of literature.[1] He held that it was also the most difficult; and he tended to judge everything by the standards of the novel. Now his originality as a critic does not exactly lie in a highly refined perception of what is good and bad in the realm of fiction. His taste, Mrs. Cheston Bennett somewhat uncharitably tells us, was "partly baroque, partly methodistic". He had vigorous likes and dislikes which he

[1] "There is something to be said for the real pre-eminence of fiction as a literary form". *The Author's Craft,* p. 38.

consistently upheld but which many would refuse to endorse. He condemned George Eliot, Thackeray, Montaigne, Henry James, Plato ("a damned unequal author") and Meredith. He praised Richardson, Jane Austen, Boswell, George Moore, Butler, Taine, Stendhal, Balzac, the French realists and the Russian novelists. Among the living he courageously defended Conrad, Hardy, Wells, but gave somewhat excessive praise to Gilchrist, Jacobs, Whitten, Montague. One suspects, and a careful perusal of the files of the *New Age* would probably bear this out, that, at least as Jacob Tonson, he was occasionally apt to give too lavish praise for external reasons, or to attack bitterly books at which he had taken a fanciful dislike. His lack of sympathy for some writers of the younger school became later quite obvious: he found it difficult to enjoy Proust, he read Joyce's *Ulysses* under compulsion, he disapproved of Mrs. Virginia Woolf's methods. It should however be recognized that in most of his attacks in *Books and Persons* he was courageous and consistent, fair though cruel, and that he not infrequently displayed a real gift for sarcasm and biting irony especially where "popular" writers of so-called realistic fiction were concerned. After praising Conrad, he wrote that if the novelist "was one Pole, Mrs. Corelli certainly was the other". He has some deadly remarks on Hall Caine. But his most typical passage of the kind is certainly the delightful end to his essay on Mrs. Humphry Ward's heroines:

I have invented a destiny for Mrs. Humphry Ward's heroines. It is terrible, and just. They ought to be caught, with their lawful male protectors, in the siege of a great city by a foreign army. Their lawful male protectors ought, before sallying forth

in a forlorn hope, to provide them with a revolver as a last refuge from a brutal and licentious soldiery: and when things come to a crisis, in order to be concluded in our next, the revolvers ought to prove unloaded. I admit that this invention of mine is odious, and quite un-English, and such as would never occur to a right-minded subscriber to Mudie's. But it illustrates the mood caused in me by witnessing the antics of those harrowing dolls.

One of his chief claims to originality as a critic of fiction will be the constant minute attention which he pays to the relation between readers and writers. His obsession of the public here stands him in very good stead. One of his earliest books *Fame and Fiction* (1901) was a study of the chief "best sellers" of the day from this new and somewhat unexpected point of view. Bennett started with the doubtful proposition that "there is a central virtue in every popular writer", that success must mean something, or at least can teach us a lesson, give us a recipe. He thus proceeded not without some impudence to contrast the reputations of Miss Braddon, Barrie, Charlotte M. Yonge, Rhoda Broughton, Sarah Grand, Marie Corelli, M. T. Meade, Silas Hocking, Churchill, with less popular misunderstood artists like George Gissing and George Moore in order to "explain to the minority what the majority likes or dislikes". In this first book he evidenced a tendency to show himself too lenient, almost obsequious to the public. "The great public is no fool. It is huge and simple and slow in its mental processes, like a good-humoured giant but it has a keen sense of its own dignity. . . . It resents for ever the tongue in the cheek, but it can appreciate a great novel". Later he slightly altered his tone, complaining that the

British public is admittedly "wrong, hypocritical, illogical, and absurd" when refusing to its novelists a certain freedom in the treatment of sexual phenomena. But he never discussed the sovereignty of the public. "Le public est une grande reality" which cannot be ignored.[1] "I should as soon dream of finding fault with the law of gravity as with the public. You are absolute monarch. A horse cannot be forced to dlink against his will. . . You are, and that is all there is to it".[2] By thus asserting with unknown audacity the omnipotence of the public Bennett comes across two important ideas which had not before been stressed. The first is the necessity of a public for an artist—a moral and not only material necessity. "Artists like washerwomen cannot live on one another. If an artist is clever enough he will usually contrive while pleasing himself to please the public or *a* public. It is his business to do so. If he does not do so he proves himself incompetent. Just as the finite connotes the infinite, so an artist connotes a public. The tragedy of all the smaller literary periodicals in France is that the breach between them and the public is complete. They are unhealthy because they have not sufficient force to keep themselves alive, and they make no effort to acquire that force".[3] He speaks further of the "contact between public and artist which is essential to the artistic function".[4] This is no doubt true to a certain extent of the novelist. Bennett's second discovery which he made early in his career and which he never ceased to preach is the necessity of a compromise between the novelist and his public. It

[1]*The Author's Crafts,* 114.
[2]*Things that have Interested Me,* V, 45.
[3]*Books and Persons.* Literary Periodicals, p. 174.
'*The Author's Craft,* p. 114.

was the conclusion of *Fame and Fiction:* "A sincere novel expresses its author's mind though not all his mind". He mentions the desirability of "the judicious compromise" in *How to become an Author.* And in *The Author's Craft* he gave final expression to this principle "You cannot defy the public. You can only get round it by ingenuity and guile. You can only go a very little further than is quite safe. . . . The artist of genuine vocation knows how to sacrifice inessentials so that he may retain essentials. And he can mysteriously put himself into a pot-boiler. . . . He can put into the trappings of the time as much of his eternal self as they will safely hold".[1] And he proceeds by means of the example of George Meredith to illustrate the truth and wisdom of his saying.

But if Bennett respects his public, if he is ready to compromise with it, and never dreams of defying it, he does not want anyone to stand between his public and him. He has no patience for the short-sighted policy of publishers and their commercial wiles, their complaints about literary agents and alleged losses on cheap editions, for "mealy-mouthed" criticism and log-rolling of any kind. He is chiefly impatient of circulating libraries which pretend to establish a more or less open censorship of puritanical tendencies by means of the commercial influence they wield.[2] He resents the hypocritical commentaries of critics who like Claudius Clear discover indecency in the frank realism of *Tono Bungay*[3] He even questions the nature and legitimacy of his public. He complains that it consists

[1] *The Author's Craft,* 113-116.
[2] *Books and Persons,* 122-133.
[3] *Books and Persons,* p. 85.

principally of members of the middle-class, timorous lovers of the status quo, the "dullest class in England", who "take to novels merely as a refuge from their own dullness". He appeals from them to a larger public, a potential public, the book-buyers of the future, members of the industrial lower middle class, who when given a chance, chiefly by the opening of literary bookshops in the provinces, will offer to the novelist a new and more satisfactory market.[1]

Bennett's *forte* as a critic of fiction is that he gives us also expert advice from the inside, as to how a novel should be constructed. Some of his books *(How to become an Author, The Author's Craft)* are didactic manuals purporting to *teach* the secrets of the trade. They contain beside unnecessary platitudes much that is interesting and legitimate —the theory of novel-writing by a master of realistic fiction. To be brief, the first essential quality of the novelist is "intensity of vision"[2] which enables him by means of observation and imagination, by placing an object "back into its past and forward into its future" to "create interest even where it does not exist".[3] The passage on the "street accident" at the beginning of *The Author 's Craft* is offered as a typical (though not perhaps very fortunate) example of how this could be done. The "intensity of vision" implies two qualities: complete though dehcate realism of which Tchekhoff and Stendhal are perhaps the most accomplished masters. True, realistic presentment is always the result of a convention but "as the art develops it finds more and more subtle methods of fitting life to the conven-

Wooks and Persons, p. 76, and *Savour of Life,* pp. 180-181.
[2]*The Authors Craft,* p. 43.
[3]*Journalism for Women.*

tion or the convention to life".[1] Secondly, charity, sympathy, pathos which is the divine apanage of Russian novelists and more particularly of Dostoevsky.

What Russian novelists lack, with one exception[2], is technique by which Bennett means.less the to him unimportant "ornamentation" of a novel (style, dialogue, descriptions) as its construction or design—the creation of character and the fine tangle of incidents. On the necessity of technique Bennett seems to have wavered somewhat. In 1914, under the influence of Stendhal and the Russians he wrote "As the years pass 1 attach less and less importance to good technique in fiction". Balzac and Stendhal scorned technique, and also Dostoevsky. Maupassant and Flaubert will not be saved by their technique. Henry James who had technique and lacked "intensity of vision" is dead. "I begin to think that great writers of fiction are by the mysterious nature of their art ordained to be amateurs".[3]

But a little later, when confronted by the excesses of young writers, he resumed his former fierce championship of technique: "the English seem to have a distaste for thorough technical competence in literature. They have not yet got rid of the Byronic attitude".[4] "Tolstoi, Dostoevsky are great *in spite* of carelessness... I thank heaven I have always gone in for technique and *The Pretty Lady* and *Riceyman Steps* are both, in my opinion, jolly well constructed and *done* books".[5] Technique is essential to the creation of character which is the heart of a novel—style,

[1] *Books and Persons, Tchekhoff.*
[2] Turgueniev.
[3] *The Author's Craft,* pp. 49-50.
[4] *Things that have Interested Me,* II, p. 69.
[5] *Journals,* II, p. 32.

invention, originality, sympathy being secondary.[1] A character has to be conventionalized; you must select traits, which being simplified and fitted together will leave an impression on the mind. Bennett's chief grievance against young writers of the modern school is their lack of technique (he even says "their lack of manners"), in composition and narrative no doubt, but chiefly in creation of character. Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf do not select. They are interested more in details than in characters. They are "despisers of form and conventionalization". They "shove in pell mell what strikes them" and think they are truer to life, which they are not.[2] They leave no impression on the mind. They give "no complete display of character".

A very imperfect critic with little inborn taste, occasionally coarse where fiction is not concerned; amusing, sensible, courageous and very practically minded; a cross between Francisque Sarcey, Faguet and Dr. Johnson with a dash perhaps of Clement Vautel; such is our final impression of Bennett as a critic. In matters of fiction (which is the bulk of his criticism) his most irritating defects disappear, and, through his admirable knowledge of the commercial side of literature and his personal ideas about novel-writing, he attains an original, almost an eminent place. He will be among the very first minor critics of the twentieth century.

[1] *Things that have Interested Me,* III, p. 193.
[2] *Journals,* III, p. 54; *Things that have Interested Me,* III, pp. 193-198.

IX

THE GREATNESS OF ARNOLD BENNETT

HE wrote in 1901: "My work will never be better than third-rate judged by the high standards, but 1 shall be cunning enough to make it impose on my contemporaries".[1] In spite of this terrible prophecy, we leave him with a sure impression of greatness. From what does it proceed?

Some novelists have a "message" which they consciously or unconsciously deliver; not he. We have seen that he despised metaphysics and proclaimed himself a materialist with a belief in human improvement through slow evolution; he was however always attracted to spiritualism and spiritualistic experiences. Of religion he had no understanding and his hostility to puritanism was violent. Politically he was a socialist with a marked democratic standpoint and prejudices against the aristocracy.[2] Social problems have left scarcely any trace in his novels. He is that rare thing in English literature: a novelist without a purpose, at least whose purpose lies entirely apart from the field of his work. "Pour quel objet ce macon batit-il?"[3]

His real message, if any, would be found in his interest in all forms of efficient activity, in work well and ingeniously performed. Also, speaking more generally, in what he

Catalogue, p. 25.

[2]*Things that have Interested Me,* I, p. 166 and novels *passim.*

[3]A. Chevalley. *Le roman anglais de notre temps.*

termed himself in his later career his enjoyment of "the savour of life", his zest, gusto, delight in the varying phenomena of everyday existence which prompted him to demand the "lion's share" with something like mercenary greed, but also which implied genuine interest and disinterested sympathy for the less attractive or sensational aspects of life: a dog run over by a bus, a street scene. "The tears of human things were not hidden from him" Darton assures us. It may be that an inverted sentimentality thus occasionally found an expression and gave its unique flavour to those passages in his work where a dim emotion can be guessed at, where sympathy or admiration is displayed about some of the most commonplace aspects of life. Cheap sentimentalism he early controlled and stifled, as he sensed in it a real danger, not only human, but artistic, "Hilda hated sentimentalism; she could not stand such talk".[1] "The brain is always more kind than the heart. The brain always does the difficult, unselfish thing and the heart always does the facile, showy thing".[2] Education and artistic conscience alike prompted this rationalistic attitude of repression or suppression—mutilation as M. Tillier would have it. But the heart took refuge in the sentimental description of ugly, unpleasant .scenes, since easy enthusiasm over the beautiful aspects, and pathetic moments of life was strictly forbidden. He found-romance in monsy, romance in season tickets, romance in all that was not naturally andaypwedly romantic. Wliile he was exasperated by the picturesqueness of Moret[3] he delighted in crowds,

[1] *Hilda Lessways,* p. 568 (Mcthuen's edition of the *Clayhanger Trilogy).*
[2] *The Human Machine,* p. 146.
[3] *Life and Letters.* January 1929. Notes.

streets, mediocrity. "I know not why I find an acrid pleasure in thus beholding mediocrity, the average, the everyday ordinary as it is; but 1 do. No Museum in Amsterdam, The Hague or Haarlecht touched me so nearly as the town of Schickham which after all I suppose I must have liked".[1] In one of the very few poems which he attempted to write he has, with apparent sincerity, described the same attitude:

> For me a rural pond is not more pure
> Nor more spontaneous than my city sewer.[2]

His sense of the wonder_o£life was such, his gusto, his relish of existence so keen that the least promising themes became exciting to him. He thus shared in the wide sympathy, the Christ-like charity of mind which he found in his beloved Russians. What a wonderful gift for a realistic novelist! It may be that he exercised it a little too often and somewhat indiscriminately. There is a disquieting article collected in the first volume of *Things that have InterestedMe* in which he records an incident during his travels in Portugal. While visiting the coast near Mount Estc,ril, which is renowned for its savage beauty, he turned from the view to watch his coachman, an old worn out creature, making himself a potion out of some white powder in a paper. On inquiring, he was told that it was bicarbonate of soda, as the coachman had "a malady of the stomach". This bare statement was enough to release torrents of emotion in the breast of the novelist. He forgot the view, he forgot the splendours of Portugal and became lost in the

[1] *Log of the Velsa,* p. 40.
[2] *Journals,* I, p. 251.

physical and mental contemplation of this "sick old man, very sorry for himself" drinking his unsavoury beverage. "Quite apart from the realization which it gave of the universality of bicarbonate of soda, this incident of the aged coachman descending from his box in order to mix himself some medicine in the rain on that wild and beautiful coast had importance for me, for somehow it was one of the most impressive and tragic that 1 remember for years". This is really going a little too far. And we cannot ignore that this tendency of discovering pathos or beauty in ordinary objects is a journalist's trick which Bennett may have caught in his early apprenticeship to the trade. We are further made uneasy by the fact that *in Journalism for Women* (1898) he had written: "Life is dull, but good newspapers are not dull; a journalist has to create interest where interest is not.... The born journalist comes into the world with a fixed notion that nothing under the sun is uninteresting. His notions are a pathetic gigantic fallacy, but to him they are real. If he can compel the public to share his illusions he has reached success and he is in the way to get rich and happy. *He lends people and events which are intrinsically dull an interest which does not properly belong to them"*.[1] Without being endowed with exceptional sentimental force one may quite well train oneself to discover sparks of interest everywhere; every journalist has to, as Bennett reminds us. I suggest that this typical tendency to find romance in the ordinary may have been acquired, that it was at least developed and encouraged by his training as a journalist. But it soon became an indissoluble association and a permanent feature of his literary self. He deliberately created interest for himself

[1]My italics.

as well as for others. Like Dostoevsky, he is never blase, superior, sophisticated. "Nothing in life is. humdrum". That became one of the tenets of his artistic creed, and is his nearest approach to a message.

He would probably have mentioned imagination as his chief claim to greatness as a novelist. However Darton remarks that he had properly speaking "no creative imagination" and refers to the "pigeon-holedness of his mind". It is quite true that the.same situationsjometimes, the same characters often recur in many of his novels;[1] Bennett himself noted in *The Author's Craft*[2] that "the necessarily autobiographical nature of fiction accounts for the creative repetition to which all novelists—including the most powerful— are reduced". But of course by imagination he meant the faculty of psychological creation or rather exploration, "the power", as he puts it himself, "to conceive oneself in a situation that one is not actually in, for instance in another person's place".[3] This claim, as any reader of his novels will admit, is eminently justified. His detarchment. his readiness to embrace the desires, joys and disappointments of beings most different from himself are admirable. He always endeavours to put persons, as well as events, "back into their past and forward into their future". Curiosity rather than deep human sympathy is the real source of his interest in the external world, of the famous "gusto" with which he envisages life. "I never see a porter without giving him a

[1] Cf. the situation of the man who has to choose between two women to whom he is equally attracted in *A Man from the North, A Great Man,* and *The Roll Call;* and, among the characters, Hilda and Lois; Edwin and Evelyn, etc.

[2] p. 63.

[3] *Married Life,* p. 112.

hearth and a home and worries and a hasty breakfast".[1] Few will deny that he owes to this gift some of the most sterling qualities of his novels—his insight into such widely different creatures as Alice Challice, Christine, Earlforward and chiefly Elsie whose secrets no amount of autobiography could have sufficed to reveal. It is chiefly in his description and analysis of the "discord between the sexes" which form the core of some of his major novels, in his subtle discrimination between the woman's and the man's side that this special form of imagination is seen to best advantage. This is all the more remarkable as his understanding of women's feelings does not proceed from any real sympathy with the woman's point of view.

This psychological imagination is of course conditioned by a power of detachment which must indeed exist in any novelist worthy of the name—detachment from others as well as from oneself—the legitimate selfishness of the creator who passes from one creation to another and beholds his work impartially. Bennett's humour slight, unobtrusive, but very real proceeds from his unimpassioned, realistic at times cruel view of men and things; it leavens pleasantly the somewhat heavy substance of his more serious novels, but is nither charitable nor good-natured. It can even be grim, with a peculiar Five Town quality, as in his description of time-worn old Shushions and of Darius Clayhanger after his stroke who "empties a spoonful of tea, though not exclusively into his mouth", or in the strangely contrasting references to Auntie Hamps after her death in private conversations and in the parson's speech. "Auntie Hamps became 'she', 'her', 'our sister'—nameless. In the

[1] *Paris Nights*. Streets, Roads and Trains, V.

dining-room she had been the paragon of all excellences—in the drawing-room, packed securely and neatly in the coffin, she was a sinner snatched from the consequences of sin by a miracle of divine sacrifice".[1] It has a less sinister quality but is none the less cruel when Hilda is made to analyse Edwin's state of health "with the calm of a good digestion discussing a bad one" or when Darius is described as "a martyrized perambulating stomach". It always remains admirably accurate and close to the facts in the explanation of the subtle differences between the headlines "Death of a famous statesman", "Death of Blank" and "Blank dead"[2] according to the rules of journalistic interpretation.

Though of paramount importance to the success of his novels Bennett's psychological insight and realistic humour are not particularly original. Others though in varying degrees have shown exactly the same gifts; they are typical of more than one Victorian novelist. But there are two features in the psychology of his characters which are outstanding and mark him out as different from his predecessors and contemporaries.

The first is the introduction of contradiction or rather of emotional discontinuity in his characters. In *Mental Efficiency* he had warned us that a mother may hate and love her son at the same time, that a man may hate his wife and yet be sentimentally interested in her. The practice of this theory is carried out in many of his novels. In *Lilian,* we remember, the heroine both hated and loved her father; George in *The Roll Call is* at once attracted and repelled by Lois; and we have not forgotten the abrupt sentimental

[1]*These Twain,* p. 1,236.
[2]*Riceyman Steps.*

changes which form a good deal of the plot of *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*. It is chiefly in the description of love, this notoriously illogical passion, that Bennett gives free play to his realistic description of psychological inconsistencies. His close knowledge of Stendhal and his acceptance of the theory of successive "crystallizations" certainly encouraged him in this new method of analysis. But of course Stendhal is the great pioneer of psychological discontinuity in the modern novel and his "crystallizations" are but an attempt at accounting scientifically for sentimental contradictions. Bennett did not carry his psychological realism to the extreme consequences of Dostoevsky; he did not display, in the admirable phrase of Andre Gide, "des personnages qui sans aucun souci de demeurer consequents avec eux-memes cedent complaisamment a toutes les contradictions, toutes les negations dont leur nature est capable".[1] He chiefly made use of this analytical discovery to proclaim the legitimacy of certain feelings which had hitherto been denied or considered as abnormal and monstrous, and point out that they can coexist with others which would seem incompatible with them: we can experience feelings of hate for the people we love and respect, especially if we are closely associated with them in daily life; it is not true to say that the two feelings struggle with each other and that the stronger conquers; they coexist and develop side by side in one of the many contradictions of our heart.

The second feature of the psychology of Bennett's characters is regression. Here he had no master, he was in need of no model. Race, education, religion, natural

[1] A. Gide. *Dostoevsky.*

tendencies all converged to the same end. Owing to the inevitable fund of autobiography from which the author must, as we know, build up his novels, Bennett had to depict heroes accustomed to conceal their feelings and even to deny their very existence. But with realistic honesty he was careful to describe the power of the tendencies thus suppressed, the secret havoc which they sometimes wrought in the conqueror's heart, and even their occasional victory which brings about one of those sudden psychological changes that illustrate the discontinuity of our sentimental life. Thus Bennett pays as much attention to what his heroes would do but will not permit themselves to do as to their actions; he thus refers to the subconscious or semi-conscious life of the soul far more frequently than any of his contemporaries. The character ceases to be one whole and is split into at least two different and wrangling parts. While thinking one thing, he speaks words to a totally different effect. " 'She's not so bad looking. She's magnificent. She's beautiful'. The thought flashed through one part of Evelyn's mind and was gone. But in another part of his mind glowed dully and steadily the thought: 'Damn these women, they're all alike. . . .Damn her!'"[1] Thus in the course of a conversation we hear two voices in every character, the unspoken one being often more important than the one that actually speaks. Bennett achieves effects of simultaneity which are dear to the modern school of novelists.[2] We shall see that he even attempts a form of interior monologue.

[1] *Imperial Palace,* p. 570.

[2] This method was used and amplified by later novelists, in particular by Jean-Richard Bloch in *La Nuit Kurde.*

These psychological methods he applied to the many characters who crowd his novels and who are still fresh in our minds: his heroines either impassioned, wayward, mysterious, "suggesting the infinite"I like Hilda Lessways—or mere perverse playthings, selfish, unnatural, unfair, though always exciting as Nina, the woman who stole everything—his younger heroes, all with something of the Card in them, at once shy and bold, hating to look fools and impatient to shake the yoke of authority, with a Stendhalian desire for risk and adventurous living—his middle-aged heroes, respectable, experienced, cautious and slightly timorous, yet with treasures of sensuous romanticism lying unused in their ageing breasts—his old men, pompous and selfish, with a grim humour and a wily mistrust which is their sole redeeming feature—his fine old women, mothers most of them, subtle, clear-sighted, disillusioned, and yet with something girlish at heart and with flashes of delightful spontaneity.

We have seen what importance Bennett attributed to charcter. which, in his eyes, was "the sole foundation .of good fiction", and how he was at trouble to explain that a character must be made up of selected conventionalized traits to leave a clear impression on the mind. Yet it i interesting to note that his characters are far from beins highly conventionalized as Balzac's or Dickens's. In fa does not select and emphasize essential traits from + ginning. He does not lay bare the mainsprings of ac takes about 200 pages to find out that Earlfbrwar and what kind of a miser he is. As early as " taught in one of his manuals[2] that "charac

[1]*Taks of the Five Towns.* **"Mary with the High** *V*
[2]***How to Become an Author.***

drawn, they can only be shown in action". This is precisely what he does. He accumulates the motives that his chief characters may have to act, or he reconstructs the causes of their past actions, but he gives us no permanent clue as to the inner secret of their soul. They are not clear themselves as to what they think or are and quite realistcally Bennett preserves this uncertainty, which is the uncertainty of life itself, describing them "as they seem to themselves" and not as an almighty creator might know them to be. If we were asked how these characters would behave in given circumstances we should be at a loss to answer, though no such uncertainty would prevail as to Grandet, Micawber or Pecksniff. Bennett's technique is here nearer to that of the modern novelists than to the Victorians. His method is not by any means as closely related to the classical convention as he seems to think. In her controversy with him, Mrs. Woolf remarked that "on or about 1910 character changed".[1] The heroes of Bennett's novels did not altogether escape this universal transformation; in fact, some of them had already anticipated it.

To suhject-matter he always attributed high importance and pleaded that if, despite admirable technical qualities, never could feel any real deep interest in the novels of 'y James, it was chiefly owing to the unfortunate of his subjects. But Bennett's own choice does not 'd itself either by its freshness or arresting originality. s are not devoid of interest, but it is interest of a or classical, not imaginative kind. In fact most rankly Yictorian: marriage and the relation 'es, parents and children, money and worldly

Bennett by Virginia Woolf (1924).

success. True he treated them in a spirit which was not that of Victorian orthodoxy. But the obsession of Victorian problems is a proof of Victorianism: Butler and Swinburne are as Victorian as Dickens or Tennyson though in a very different manner. In the "father and son" relation however he introduced a note of reckless realistic courage which is even more striking than the somewhat oversentimental preaching heard in *The Way of all Flesh.* Indeed the measure of his (very relative) originality is the measure of his realism. In the social satire of *Raingo* and chiefly in his treatment of the courtesan as a literary character he certainly went further (even though it was just a little further) than his contemporaries. His realism was not only frank; it was also admirably subtle and cleverly introduced. But it was chiefly in his treatment of money that he differed from the accepted tradition. Except perhaps in *Riceyman Steps,* money is to him not associated with tragedy and sordid realism, but creative of adventure and poetry. He claimed that "the three great modern analysts of sexual relationship (Bourget, Balzac and Stendhal) did not really see the finance of economics". The way in which money could be gained, spent, made to last, lost, regained and multiplied struck him as wonderful. The mechanism of interest, percentage, royalties, etc., was to him amusing apart from any gross idea of worldly advantage. The way in which various people organized their respective budgets interested him deeply. In fact, there was no money problem for him as for, say, Gissing; there was only a pastime and a miracle. The Card is just as unreal and fairy-like as Ariel. This point of view, so different from that of the stern Victorians, gives originality to his novels but is also a source of weakness

as far as realism is concerned; in most cases Bennett is never so unconvincing as when he treats of money matters.[1]

No one however could be more passionately over-scrupulous in questions of credibility and verisimilitude. This is observed in the plots of his great novels. If they often appear slow and uneventful it is because he feared to make them unreal by crowding them with incidents. As with Maupassant or Flaubert, reality was to him grey, dull, quiet, tragic only in its very lack of the fresh or the un-expected. In his early melodramatic novels of course he lavishly squandered murder, rape and arson. But there is no mean between the wild and violent improbabilities of his early work and the anaemic plots of his great novels. We seem to pass from the hysterical motion of pre-war films to the slow lantern of our fathers. In fact he appears afraid of introducing a new fact and not infrequently gets "stuck" so that he has to rouse himself and give his story a move on. We know from his *Journals* that he sometimes had to stop in the course of the composition of a novel "for want of ideas". In *The Old Wives' Tale* the one violent incident (Daniel Povey's murder of his wife) is introduced suddenly *in* the midst of a sluggish narrative and not a little startles the reader. In some of his best stories the plot dwindles to a mere nothing and the story seems literally to stagnate. This is the case in *The Death of Simon Fuge* in which the movement of the story is only supplied by a

[1]The contrast with George Gissing is striking: Gissing may even be said to risk improbability by the opposite extreme, by the relendess perversity with which he condemns his heroes to mediocrity and failure. Strangely enough, Bennett is not obsessed by money like Gissing. His novels, in a sense, are less mercenary.

series of aimless visits from house to house; in *Elsie and the Child*—a mere succession of family-scenes in the Doctor's household; and chiefly in *Riceyman Steps,* the Racinian simplicity of which has already been commented on. This method, while rendering it difficult to sustain the interest, makes for realism and verisimilitude as the reader always has a tendency to discount as improbable any sudden event of great consequence.

Bennett's originality lies, not in his subjects, but in the backgrground of his novels. In *How to Become an Author* (1903) he insisted that the action of a novel "should spring out of the characters and the characters should spring out of the general environment". This rule he observed, at least! in his earlier career, and we have seen how he turned to Staffordshire for the pattern and framework of his stories. His originality as a writer of regionalist literature consists first in the very choice of the country described—a highly industrialized and on the whole wealthy district, yet narrow, provincial and with as marked idiosyncrasies as any country town of Scotland, Barsetshire or Central France; secondly in the markedly unsympathetic presentment of this picture of provincial life. He longs to escape from the scenes which he painfully reconstructs. In this he differs from Scott, Sand and Hardy. His real master is Balzac, who, as duly noted by his disciple, excelled in establishing relations between the characters and their surroundings and weaving them into a simple pattern. In both writers, the choice and the wealth of details, the photographic accuracy,and merciless realism of the description are remarkable.

It is however, in the commercial background which he supplies to many of his novels that Bennett stands almost

alone. Already the draper's shop in *The Old Wives' Tate,* the printing-works in *Clayhanger* were described with a loving minuteness which surpassed Balzac's complete though chaotic enumerations. But when he comes to the big luxury trades, the Stores or the Grand Hotel, he moves in a sphere which is entirely his own. We have seen how he had anticipated by thirty years the literary possibilities of the "Grand Hotel". In this somewhat restricted and exotic field he achieves perfect fusion of the realistic and romantic strains of his inspiration as a novelist.

To these subjects such as they were he applied an exceedingly minute and patient technique which he would probably have put forward as his chief claim to literary excellence. It consists of the selection and combination of a large number of details tending to create an impression of coherence and probability. All. facts which would seem to obscure this general impression were ruthlessly pared off and eliminated. No incident was too trifling to be included if it could (sometimes merely by remaining in the subconscious mind of the reader) pave the way for another incident of slightly greater importance which would itself lead to the catastrophe. "Everything matters that weakens the confidence of the reader in the author's regard for truth".[1] Thus he brought in the shooting of the elephant to justify the fateful meeting between Sophia Baines and Gerald Scales; and he caused Carlotta Peel to eat strawberries and champagne in order to explain physiologically the attack of appendicitis to which she succumbs a few pages later. His attention to medical details and his frequent description of various forms of diseases have often been

[1] *How to Become an Author.*

noted.[1] The reason is that they afforded to his plots ideal catastrophes which could not be taxed with improbability and which were prepared long in advance by a patient description of the slow progress of the disease (140 pages to Sam's pneumonia in *Raingo).*

It was to this feature of his technique—to the great number of details which he must keep in mind and hold firmly in their proper place while never forgetting their destined effect—that Bennett referred when he complained of the "difficulty of maintaining the imaginative strain" in a novel. This is why, to him, a short story or drama, being brief and less complex, was mere child's play. "The short story", he wrote, "is easier than the novel as a sonnet is easier than an epic".[2] In fact the "imaginative tension" in a book like *Imperial Palace* must have been terrific. No wonder he thought the novel the highest and most difficult form of art. For those who ignored this all-important part of the novelist's trade, he had no patience. He complained that Anatole France could not construct a novel. He pointed out that in her novel *From Man to Man* Olive Schreiner made Rabeka write a 20,000 words letter in one night; this glaring impossibility rendered the book worthless in his eyes.[3]

Just as a mechanic or a chauffeur are responsible for the

[1]Bright's disease *{Leonora),* measles *{A Great Man),* angina pectoris *{The Glimpse, Loot of Cities),* heart disease *{Raingo, Hugo),* haemorrhage of the retina *{Whom God Hath Joined),* catalepsy *{City of Pleasure),* compression of the brain *{Sinews of War),* typhoid fever, gastric dizziness and 'paralysie glosso-labio laryngee' (*The Old Wives' Tale),* congestion of the brain *{Clayhanger),* double pneumonia *{Lilian, Raingo),* cancer *{Riceyman Steps),* neurasthenia *{Dream of Destiny),* etc. Quain's *Dictionary of Medicine* and the advice of a number of medical friends enabled Bennett to describe the symptoms correctly.

[2]*Books and Persons.* "E. A. Poe."

[3]*Savour of Life.*

safety of the engine which they construct or they drive, Bennett felt himself responsible for the. verisimilitude of the actions of the characters he had created. This unflinching honesty of technique—essential to the smooth working of the machine—he maintained throughout his books, the improbabilities and melodramatic tricks of his early novels being confined to a very definite portion of his work. In particular he applied this gift of patient and loving construction to two points of technique which have always exercised the talent of novelists. First the,double narrative from different or opposite points of view. The difficulty had been attempted before, and it has become one of the chief methods of the detective stories; Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* (or Browning in *The Ring and the Book)* had shown how it could be done. But no such close correspondence of minute particulars, no sustained parallel description of the same scenes from the man's and the woman's point of view as are to be found in the last parts of *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways* had ever been attempted. One may think that the result is not worth the trouble; that the correspondence is so close, that the indentations fit so closely into each other that repetition and futility cannot be avoided; but one cannot deny the extraordinary artistic *conscience* and the psychological power revealed by such an achievement.

The greatest triumph *ofBennet's* technique lies however *in* another field. He used his craft with as much patience and tenacity as ever, and to incomparably better purpose, to give in a natural manner the impression of the passage of time in the course of a long narrative. "To convey the idea of the passage of a considerable length of time is an

extremely difficult business, and I doubt if it can be accomplished by means of a device. . . . There is no alternative out to convey the impression very gradually, without any direct insistence—in the manner of life itself".[1] This sums up the essence of Bennett's method which he so magnificently applied In *The Old Wives' Tale*[2] and it flfcay be accounted as the finest achievement of his technique, which none of the younger novelists, hard though they have tried[3], have been able to equal.

It remains to point out that the extreme precision and efficiency of Bennett's technique do not imply an undue abstraction, a semi-mechanical process of springs released and well-oiled wheels running in grooves, which would be fatal in work of realistic pretensions. His novels have the complexity of life; there is no arbitrary simplification about them. Bennett always tried to conceal the elaborate constructions of his technique; the more complex and the more extensive were his preparations, the more he strove to make his narrative appear casual and in fact sometimes almost formless. This he attained by strict suppression of the author's personality; by a careful avoidance of rhetoric and "rounding off" effects (such as say Hardy's final paragraph in *Tess* which canbe contrasted with the ending of *Elsie)**
But he chiefly attained it by the accumulation of apparently unorganized details. Much as he disliked the younger school of novelists, those "new despisers of form and convention" with their "worship of details" and their inability

[1]***savour of Life,* p. 254.**
[2]**See above, pp. 116-120.**
[3]**Mrs. Woolf in *Waves,* Proust in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,* etc.**
[4]**"The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess," etc. "She soon began to feel hungry."**

to select, it must be recognized that he occasionally achieved effects which were not without some connection with theirs. This is chiefly seen in *Imperial Palace* in which Bennett seems, consciously or unconsciously, to have imitated some of the tricks of the very school which he denounced: "Coffee. Cigar. Dusk. Darkness. Bill-paying. The industrial lamps and flares of Creil. . . . Weariness. A tunnel. Gare du Nord. . . . Sauve qui peut. Hostile and greedy glances of porters".[1] More striking still is the passage of Chapter LXVI *(Her Letter)* in which Evelyn meditates on Grade's letter, announcing the end of their liaison, Mrs. Harbour's protest against the "Harem" of the Rajah, and the indigestion which begins to torment him: "If she was the mother of the Rajah she'd rule the Rajah and all Java and Morocco and Cambodia or wherever it is he comes from.... But I've beaten her. What a woman! An artist! Female Don Juan—Donna Juana—That's it. Donna Juana! Always running around and making out to herself that she is searching for the ideal. . . . O what a rogue and peasant slave I am. . . . I'm dashed if my stomach isn't all cold lead. Curious the connection between mind and body. It's all imagination but my stomach's like lead". The passage reads like an interior monologue of Joyce or Mrs. Woolf slightly clarified and organized by Bennett's everlasting technique.

Bennett considered himself as a master of style. "I was always passably stylistic. I write everything with a nice regard for English, I would lavish a night on a few paragraphs".[2] Critics however have often disagreed, and have

[1] *Imperial Palace,* **Chap. LI, II.**
[2] **The** ***Truth about an Author.***

proved strangely severe on that point. Mr. Simons complains of a certain "puffiness" about his style. Darton calls it "mediocre" and accuses him of writing "bad English" occasionally; Manly and Rickert refer to his "prosaip pedestrianism"; and Priestley flatly declares that "he never achieves fine style", arguing that his prose has "no orchestra, no Beauty". The latter remark warns us of a misunderstanding which should first be cleared up. That Bennett was not at first master of the style of *Clayhanger* is obvious from the gradual improvement and evolution which can be traced in *Anna, Leonora, Whom God Hath Joined, The Old Wives' Tale.* That this style was acquired,, partly through the influence of Maupassant, Moore and Stendhal, that it was the result of severe training and self-discipline is beyond doubt. In 1895 he had adopted the rule of "striking out every sentence that is 'fine' " in what he wrote. What those "fine" sentences were we can imagine from the "damnably Mudiesque" passages of *Sacred and Profane Love*[1] in which he tried a last and belated experiment in the romantic "musical" style (which Mr. Priestley seems to regret) with the terrible results that have been described. This style though manfully suppressed in the later years is apt to crop up occasionally in the later collections. "His spirit and hers seemed almost to coalesce into one being. Extremest fulness of life".[2] It shows that this "style with an orchestra" constituted a very serious danger for Bennett and it is a high compliment to his critical faculty that he realized this and turned away from it. It was about 1908 as he was preparing to- write T*he old wives'Yale that the*

[1]Sec above, pp. 91-92.
[2] *The Night Visitor.* "Honour". See also the theatrical style of his plays.

change definitely took place and the new style was born. He was then reading Stendhal's *Journal* in the *Mercure de France.* The resemblance between the style of the two writers is indeed striking. In both the same clearness and adequacy to the meaning may be observed; the same repetitions and apparent carelessness, the same contempt for rhetorical redundancy and musical effects. It is well known that Stendhal recommended reading a few pages of "le code civil" before literary composition in order to get the right tone. Similarly Bennett proclaimed in *The Log of the Velsa* that *"The Pilot's Guide to the Baltic* was admirably written, lucid, succinct, elegant" and that "it might serve as a model to novelists", being essentially composed in a masculine style free from affectation and theatricality, from "embroidery and ornament superimposed". I wouldchoose as a good example of this style with its virtues and shortcomings the description of the quarrel in the tenement in *Riceyman Steps:*

Losing what little remained of his self-control, Joe hit Elsie a strong blow on the shoulder. She was not ready for it. . . and she lost her balance, falling against the french-polisher's perambulator, which crashed violently into the stairs. . .. Elsie's head caught the wheel of the perambulator. A great shrill scream arose; the children had followed Elsie out of the yard . . . Joe, appalled at the consequences of his passion, ran off, banging the door behind him. . . . Two mothers recognized the howls of their children____Two fathers, desperate with exasperation, but drawn by the mighty attraction of a good row, jumped murderous from their.warm and fetid beds. Two half-clad figures appeared in the doorways of the ground-floor rooms and three on the stairs.

Elsie sat up, dazed, and then stood up, then sank limply down

again. One mother smacked her child and a child which was not hers. The other mother protested furiously from the stairs. The paradise of Sunday morning lay shattered. The meat-salesman had sense, heart, and initiative. He took charge of Elsie. The hellish din died down. A few minutes later Elsie was seated in the rocking-chair by the window in his front room. She wept apologetically. Little was said, but all understood that Elsie's fantastic sweetheart had behaved disgracefully_____Three quarters of an .hour later Dr. Raste calmly arrived. Joe had run to the surgery and shouted at him: "I've killed her, sir." The meat-salesman, having himself lighted a bit of a fire, left the room while the doctor examined the victim. The doctor could find nothing but one bruise on the front of Elsie's left shoulder. With a splendid gesture of devotion the meat-salesman's wife gave her second child's warm milk to the reluctant Elsie. There happened to be no other stimulant in the house. Peace was re-established, and even slumber resumed.[1]

Let those who wish "orchestra" and rhythmical effects stop their ears and turn aside. But to one who realizes from what depths Bennett had risen, the achievement is miraculous. To plunge into Bennett's mature style after reading Ruskin or Thackeray is like a drink of cold water after honey and spiced wine.

His position now appears with tolerable precision. His method is selective realism groceeding a controlled and mild form of romantic inspiration. His excellenceand oxiginality lie in his psychology, in some aspects of his technique, in his style. His is a curious position; he was in acute reaction against the early Victorian novel and under-went the direct influence of Moore and theFrench realists. But his real affinity was with Stendhal, Jane Austen, Trollope

[1]*Riceyman Steps,* I, XI.

on the one hand; with Gissing and Dostoevsky on the other. He disliked the slovenly technique of Dickens, the sentimentality of Thackeray; but he could feel that Meredith's psychological digressions and Henry James's elaborate technique were not enough to make them great novelists. Towards the young writers he adopted a critical attitude (critical of course as far as method was concerned, for he was kindly, interested, and not a little impressed), but he was nearer to them than he thought or than they thought.[1] It is not quite true to say that "while Wells was an innovator, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy merely consolidated the novel on its Victorian foundations and tidied it up". Bennett's influence is undoubted and will be permanent. He secured, by his courage but also by his skill, more freedom, moral and religious, for the novelist; he rendered a minimum of technique necessary, and taught the reader not to tolerate a certain kind of carelessness or effrontery on the part of his favourite authors;[2] last but not least he helped in the transformation of the novel and in the advent of a new technique by introducing discontinuity in the psychology of his characters, by attempting a more subtle rendering of the passage of time, and by making the construction of the story less obvious, and therefore more artistic. ^

Thus he stands halfway between the Victorians he the

[1]Mrs. Virginia Woolf complained that Bennett was guiltie than his contemporaries in his half-hearted realism, because he was better equipped than they were—thus recognizing that his technique was closer to that of the modern school.

[2]His position as to the necessity of technique may be compared with that of Fielding reacting against the formless narratives of Richardson and his school; his technique, however, is subtler and less obtrusive than Fielding's.

liked and the young generation he mistrusted, related to both, a mighty link in the chain of the English novel. Not quite in the English tradition—he was too frankly realistic, too technically, perfect, too unsentimental for that; but so clever, so keenly aware of his "market", that he never broke with his public and had probably the largest audience that a novelist of his class and of his turn of mind ever enjoyed in England. If we compare him with his three great contemporaries Wells, Galsworthy, Conrad, all of whom, though in varying degree, he loved and admired, we feel that he can stand the test. Some would at present place him last in that list of names. And yet the final decision of posterity is by no means certain. Against him he has his large and uneven production, his middle-class outlook, his lack of original conviction and social or metaphysical views. But there is nothing artificial or insincere in his immense gallery of novels, nothing that will be exposed, exploded, found out as wrong, impossible, hollow; and even in his most forlorn books there is artistic honesty and comparative technical excellence. For he was a critic as well as a novelist (which the others were not) and he could see himself with admirable impartiality. One thing at least is sure: he cannot yet definitely be given his proper rank among the four great novelists of the early twentieth century. And he can afford to wait.

APPENDIX

THE SOURCES OF THE "OLD WIVES' TALE"

WHETHER *The Old Wives' Tale* is Arnold Bennett's best novel is not certain. But there can be no doubt that it has for many years been widely considered as a masterpiece. When it was begun in 1907, the author sat down to his work with the firm intention of making it his *magnum opus.* It achieved success slowly, but steadily, in a way designed to inspire confidence.[1] Its reputation has survived a considerable change of tastes and fashions and seems now certain to endure; for, apart from its intrinsic merits, the novel combines qualities of realism and selection which ought to command the permanent approval of the English mind. With its variety of scenes and wealth of incidents, the book is a perpetual compromise: a compromise between the author and his models, the author and his public, the author and himself.[2] It has become and is

[1]"For six weeks after [the publication] the English public steadily confirmed an opinion . .. that the work was honest but dull.. .flowever, the reception of the book gradually became less and less frigid" {Old Wives' Tale, Preface).

[2]"The sagacious artist respects basic national prejudices . . . [He] can only go a very little further than is quite safe . . . he puts into the trappings of the time as much of his eternal self as they will safely hold" *(The Author's Craft,* pp. 113,116).

likely to remain a classic. As such it invites critical analysis and should repay dissection.

Arnold Bennett was never at pains to conceal his sources. While always emphasizing (with the characteristic dislike of the journalist for the scholar) that he "hated the awful business of research" and was incapable of it, he frankly and almost complacently recorded in his prefaces, essays, or journals the models and incidents, which, as he thought, had an influence on the writing of his novels. Authors, however, should never be trusted even when they least appear to cover their traces. There is such a thing as unconscious imitation. There is such a thing as displaying one source so as to conceal another. There is also such a thing as labouring under a delusion: in April 1908 Bennett wrote[1] that he was "so influenced" by the style of Stendhal that he began to write his novel in a freer vein as the passages describing the birth of Constance's son and the "kids' party" in the second book of *The Old Wives' Tale* would show. I defy anyone to detect in the incriminated pages any marked stendhalian flavour.

Bennett's statements in this respect should be duly checked and verified. The sources of *The Old Wives' Tale,* like those of any realistic novel on such a scale, must needs be numerous and variegated. They range from mere general influences such as Maupassant, Moore, and Dostoevsky, to incidents borrowed directly from life without any literary medium (the meeting with the fat woman in the Duval Restaurant,[2] Sophia's discovery of Gerald's unfaithfulness

[1] *Journals,* I, p. 285.
[2] *Preface and Journals,* I, p. 130.

as he drives past her in a cab, etc.[1]), and to more purely literary sources in which Bennett has made use of material which had already been prepared for the public as literature of some sort. It is of the latter category that I shall chiefly have to speak; and I shall confine my attention to three central sections of the book: the starting-point or "situation" proper (the two girls in the drapers' shop); the public execution scene at Auxerre; and the siege of Paris. It is hoped that in the process something may be learnt about the methods of the novelist and possibly about the artistic value of his work.

We know that the novel was conceived in November 1903 when the scene witnessed by Bennett at a Paris restaurant afforded a general theme: the slow degeneration of feminine beauty into old age and ugliness; this theme he immediately enlarged and developed by comparing and contrasting it with Maupassant's *Une Vie*. How it occurred to him to give the fat woman a sister is not so clear. The statement made several years later in the *Preface* that he wanted to "go one better" than Maupassant should be received with caution. But it is quite possible that for the sake of contrast and variety he thought of combining *Une Vie* with *Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme* which is the only novel of Maupassant mentioned in the entry of the *Journals* for November 1903. One thing seems certain: from the beginning one of the sisters was destined to a quiet stajf-at-home career while the progress of the other must be through scandalous adventures. In fact Sophia was to have become,

[1]This incident was suggested by an actual experience in the life of one of Bennett's near relatives, as I was informed by a member of his family.

in Bennett's own words, "a whore and all that." He was still of the same mind several months later when he recorded as material for his novel the death of a mysterious pretty English woman from Liverpool "who gave lessons in English to a constant stream of *messieurs chics* and expired alone at 7 rue Breda after being robbed by a Spanish male friend."[1] It was only much later and in accordance with that policy of compromise which has been described that Bennett changed his mind. But it is well that the reader should know from what abominations Sophia Baines was saved and how truly miraculous was the triumph of her virtue over the temptations which beset her creator's mind.

Still, all this supplied but a general idea: the setting down in minute detail of the widely different lives of two sisters. They had to become individualized; the proper background must be provided for their characters and evolutions: the draper's shop, the two contrasting marriages with the shop-assistant and the rich young fop who proves disloyal and unworthy. I believe that this situation was found by Bennett in a book which has not to my knowledge been mentioned before in connection with *The Old Wives' Tale:* Balzac's *Maison du Chat qui Pelote.*

That Bennett knew the novel by October 1908 there can be' no reasonable doubt. He had already read much Balzac in the original or in translations before he went abroad. After a little time spent in Paris he could claim that he had "read all the absolutely first-class French novels of the nineteenth century".[2] It is inconceivable that he should have missed *La Maison du Chat qui Pelote,* which its position

[1] *Journals,* I, p. 153.
[2] Ib., I, p. 141.

in the first volume of the works of Balzac, at the very beginning of *La Comedie Humaine* and the *Seines de la Vie Privie,* makes particularly conspicuous.

There we find, standing in the middle of the rue St.-Denis, "presque au coin de la rue du Petit-Lion", the "Maison du Chat qui Pelote", the shop of the "Maitre Drapier Guillaume" as precisely located as the Baines's shop in St. Luke's Square. Of the daily trade and of the routine of the shop we get some very technical glimpses, as in the description of the last day of stocktaking which, though less pleasant and much shorter, is probably as accurate as the scene of the "tickets" in the fifth chapter of *The Old Wives Tale.* Madame Guillaume has none of the mellow charm of Mrs. Baines, with her "figure maigre et longue trahissant une devotion outree . . . sa tete presque sexagenaire [ornee] d'un bonnet garni de barbes... sa parole breve et ses gestes... saccades comme les mouvements d'un telegraphe", but the two worthy ladies occupy a very similar position in both novels. Madame Guillaume has two daughters, Virginie and Augustine, who immediately remind us of Constance and Sophia. True Virginie is probably far plainer than Constance, as she takes after her mother, "mais la jeunesse attenuait Fair disgracieux que sa ressemblance avec sa mere donnait parfois a sa figure; et... elle eait douce et patiente'." Physically at least, Augustine is the Sophia of the family: "mignonne, gracieuse et pleine de candeur," she is distinguished by an "absence de tout lien physique avec ses parents" and, like Sophia, dislikes her commercial surroundings and yearns for romance; "Augustine avait recu du hasard une ame assez elevee pour sentir le vide de cette existence. Elle semblait ecouter de loin les confuses revela-

tions de cette vie passionnee qui met les sentiments a un plus haut prix que les choses."

We are now sorely tempted to find in the premier commis of Maltre Guillaume, Joseph Lebas, "orphelin et sans fortune," "au coeur aussi excellent que ses jambes etaient longues et son buste epais," a first sketch, or rather a negative print of the memorable Daniel Povey. All the more so a? the vmmetry is completed by the presence of Theodore de Sommervieux, the aristocratic young dandy, whose good looks and faithless heart are obviously reminiscent of Gerald Scales. Much as in the English story, Virginie marries Joseph Lebas and enjoys the quiet, sensible happiness of Constance, while Augustine, who marries Theodore against the desires of her family, soon finds the emptiness of her dreams of romantic love.

Here ends the resemblance, and it should be duly pointed out that in those very similarities there are substantial differences. But even those show how Bennett probably conceived some of his characters in direct contrast to those of Balzac. Maitre Guillaume, who plays a prominent part as master of the shop and head of the family in Balzac's novel, was deliberately cast aside by Bennett; John Baines is from the beginning of the tale a hopeless invalid confined to his bed by paralysis. But we hear enough about his past importance and commercial ability to know him as not unworthy of his formidable French colleague. The reason for his being thus placed in the background is obvious: Bennett wanted to make room for Mrs. Baines, to depict as the central figure of the first book of his novel one of those mellowing matrons, charming though masterful, that he delighted to portray, as his *Leonora* shows well enough.

The searchlight has been transferred from the husband to the wife, and it must be owned that Madame Guillaume is but a sorry counterpart for Mrs. Baines. In fact Madame Guillaume is rather suggestive of a married Miss Chetwynd.

But the central difference lies in the character of Sophia, Here is a girl as pretty and attractive as Augustine and with the same romantic longings of escape from the shop. But Augustine proves weak and nerveless in *f* resence of grief and disillusion. She implores the mercy of her husband's mistress, she goes for advice to her relatives, she finally dies of a broken heart. We can understand Bennett's reactions to such a character. "I'll show them how a lass of the Five Towns would behave in such circumstances." Hence the amazing energy and commercial astuteness of Sophia. In fact her figure assumes new and more vigorous significance when confronted with that of Augustine.

For there can, of course, be no question of belittling Bennett's originality. He had lived in a draper's shop when he was a boy.[1] He wanted to introduce into his novels that regional element of which he was a master. What need had he to turn to Balzac unless he wanted to? But the fact remains that the general conception of *The Old Wives' Tale* was not to begin with necessarily connected with the Five Towns as the entries in the *Journals*[2] show. That it was not either connected with a draper's shop is obvious from *Sacred and Profane Love,* in which Carlotta Peel, that first sketch of Sophia, belongs to the more genteel circles of Burslem Society. It was probably Balzac's novel that induced him to connect his two heroines with the commercial back-

[l]*Preface.*
Journals, I, pp. 130-131,153.

ground which his own recollections readily supplied. It was in conformity as well as in contrast to Balzac's novel that the initial situation of *The Old Wives'* Tale was conceived. One last detail will give a further instance of the semi-negative character of this influence: the sign-board of Balzac's shop, "Le Chat qui Pelpte," is accorded special prominence; it gives its title to the novel; it is described at length in the first pages. Bennett, on the other hand, carefully points out that there was no sign-board to the Baines's shop:,"A strange peculiarity was that it bore no sign-board. Once it had had a large sign-board which a memorable gale had blown into the Square. Mr. Baines had decided not to replace it. He had always objected to what he called 'puffing'." The change is symbolic.

The material which was used for the two other episodes under discussion—the public execution at Auxerre and the siege of Paris—is of a less literary character, and Bennett himself has referred to its existence.

He asserts somewhat vaguely in the *Preface* that he has never been present at a public execution "as the whole of my information about public executions was derived from a series of articles on them which I read in the Paris *Matin"*. I was able, through the courtesy of the Directors of the *Matin,* who gave me permission to consult the files of the paper in their library, to trace the articles to which Bennett alludes. They are six in number and appeared between 22 and 27 August 1907, over the name of Georges de Labruyere. They all deal with public executions, but Bennett chiefly made use of those of the 24th and 25th of August, describing the execution of Eyraud. He has followed them with a closeness which is astonishing. In fact

the execution of Rivain in the third book of *The Old Wives Tale* is nothing but a description—at second hand—of the execution of Eyraud.

The motive for the crime of his Rivain is, however, different. It will be remembered that Rivain had killed the "celebrated Claudine Jacquinot", who was "a tremendous-er-wrong 'un here in the forties" in order to "steal her jewels and money for a younger lady friend". Eyraud, who was executed on 3 February 1891, had murdered a bailiff, Gouffe, with the help of an accomplice, Gabrielle Bompart. It seems that Bennett, to make the crime more romantic and justify the excitement of the crowd, borrowed its motive and circumstances from another "case" mentioned by Georges de Labruyere[1]—that of Prado, who had killed Marie Aguetant, a *demi-mondaine* of the passage Saunier. There may also be a reminiscence of that Martin, described as a *maquereau* in an entry of Bennett's *Journals,*[2] who had stabbed his unfortunate *protegee.* But Martin, much to Bennett's surprise, had been acquitted.

With the description of the effect produced in the night-restaurants by the news that the execution is about to take place we are back again to Eyraud and the description of Labruyfere:

> Aussitot des parties s'organisent. On ne se couche pas. On frete des fiacres ou Ton s'en va en bandes. Tout un peuple de fetards, de filles, d'apaches, grands et petits, commence a refluer vers le Boulevard Voltaire et la Rue de la Roquette.

Bennett now adheres closely to the text of the newspaper.

[1] *Mdtin, 26* August 1907.
[2] *Journals,* I, p. 178.

The orgiastic atmosphere during the night preceding the execution is obviously suggested by the flamboyant tone of the articles. The clearing of the Square by the police with the exception of the "privileges que laissaient filtrer les barrages" is also mentioned. It will be remembered that Gerald and Chirac, thanks to the latter's *coupe-file,* are among these "privilegies". The sadistic impatience of the maddened crowd, on which Bennett so powerfully enlarges, the crowded cafes and the drinking scenes, all is there, down to the ditty roared by the crowd:

Au deli des cordons de police, la foule augmente de minute en minute, sauvage, cynique, obscene. Les "troquets" d'alentour regorgent. On entend exploser des bouchons de champagne. Et les rires des filles fusent, indecents, domines parfois par un refrain a la mode, chante en chœur:

Le voila
Nicolas
Ah! Ah! Ah!

The art with which Bennett adapts this detail is faultless in its simplicity:

At intervals the crowd would burst out in a violent staccato—

Le voila
Nicholas!
Ah! Ah! Ah!

and the final "ah" was devilish.

Next comes the arrival of the wagon bringing the guillotine, with its red lantern, the fitting together of the pieces supervised by Deibler, the testing of the triangular blade, the departure of the workmen and assistants who, after

having "retire leur blouse et reendosse leurs vetements de ville" ("The workmen doffed their blouses and put on coats"), adjourn to a neighbouring public house for refreshments. Here Bennett has made use of one further detail, of a particularly sinister nature, mentioned by Labruyere. But he has half-veiled and attenuated it so that it is almost unintelligible to the dazed Sophia who hears the executioners coming down the stairs of the Hotel de Vezelay after their meal:

Then, after an age, she heard a door open, and a low voice say something commandingly in French, and then a "Oui, Monsieur" and a general descent of the stairs. The executioner and his aids were leaving. "You," cried a drunken English voice from an upper floor—it was the middle-aged Englishman translating what the executioner had said—"you will take the head."

The French text makes this brutally plain:

Deibler tutoie ses employes. Il leur donne quelques indications. "Toi, dit-ila I' Tun, tu prendras la tete." "Moi, intervient un second, . . . je Tattirerai sous la lunette." "Et il faudra bien qu'il y passe," conclut un troisieme.

The last scene is taken bodily from Labruyere with a few typical alterations. It is a remarkable parallel, which while bringing out the quiet and sober artistic methods by which Bennett improved the original, helps us to understand the impressive realism of the page.

We learn from the *Preface* that the idea of including the siege of Paris in the novel was an afterthought which occurred to Bennett half-way through the book when he

was struck by the chronological possibilities. Of the three sources which lay at his disposal—the Leberts, Claretie, and Sarcey—he made an exceedingly moderate use. From a comparison of these sources with his narrative, his determination to treat an episode which was fertile in romantic possibilities in a matter-of-fact and realistic manner is made clearer than ever.

His conversatiom with M. Lebert, the retired railway servant from whom he was then renting a *villa* at Fontainebleau, are recorded in the *Journals,*[1] and, in a more elaborate form, in *Things that have Interested Me.*[2] The one incident that Bennett seems to have derived from this quarter has reference to life under the Commune[3] and is insignificant. But he may have gained from him, as he claims, the "perception that ordinary people went on living very ordinary lives in Paris during the siege". Just as his master, Stendhal, had depicted with perfect objectivity only the minor incidents of the battle of Waterloo which his hero was able to witness, Bennett decided to give us a narrow and unimaginative view of the siege such as Sophia saw and was impressed by. Only, of course, Stendhal's sober pages read like an epic poem in comparison, and it may be that Bennett went just a little too far.

Claretie's "popular work", which he mentions in the *Preface,* is the illustrated edition of the *Histoire de la Revolution de* 1870-71, published in 1872:[4] Bennett asserts that he

[1] I, pp. 266-267.

[2] I, pp. 180-182.

[3] When Sophia and the whole house have to take shelter in the cellar (IV, Chap. VII, 3).

[4] *Histoire de la Revolution de* 1870-71, *de la chute de l'Empire au Gouvernement de M. Thiers* par Jules Claretie, illustrle par M M . Blanchart, Chiffart, etc., publile aux Bureaux du Journal l'Eclipse, 1872.

merely "looked at the pictures". This is not quite accurate as he borrowed from it the description of popular enthusiasm at the false news of a victory on 6 August[1] and some information about the balloons, as we shall see later.

Francisque Sarcey's *Siege de Paris,*[2] which he "read aloud to his wife" at the time, was his chief source throughout. We can well understand that this candid, unaffected, though deeply moving, piece of narrative was far more to his taste than Claretie's over-sentimental record. In fact the disillusioned tone of Sarcey's book is felt more than once in Bennett's own style.

He owes to it a large number of details and impressions, sometimes mere reminiscences alluded to in the course of a sentence, which it would be too long to extricate from the close pattern of his narrative and to identify: the crowded cafes after Sedan (p. 59; *O.W.T.,* VI, i), the ambulance flags hoisted on one-fourth of the houses in Paris (p. 107; *O.W.T.,* III, vi, 2), the "diners de siege" (p. 101; *O.W.T.,* III, vi, 3), the landlord's joke about his dog's bone (p. 149; *O.W.T.,* III, vi, 4), the possibility of getting a decent meal at certain restaurants (pp. 217-218; *O.W.T.,* III, vi, 4), the lack of fuel (p. 221; *O.W.T.,* III, vi, 2), etc.

Sometimes it is a mere hint and it is necessary, as in the case of Labruyere's articles, to turn to Sarcey's pages to understand the meaning of the implication: "The fact was that the commerce which resulted in fresh green vegetables in the heart of a beleaguered town was notorious" (III, vi, 4). Sarcey explains (p. 159) that a large number of "hardis

[1]P. 142. Cf. *Old Wives' Tales,* HI, Chap. V, 4 *infinem.*

[2]Le *Siege de Paris* par Francisque Sarcey, 1871. My references are to the edition published by Marpon et Flammarion.

maraudeurs" went out every day to pick vegetables from the deserted fields almost under the fire of the enemy. But the commerce was notorious because "ces maraudeurs etaient les proteges de Messieurs les Prussiens, dont ils traversaient impunement les lignes. A quel prix? On le suppose aisement," Sarcey meaning, of course, that they were spies and reported to the Germans the dissensions by which Paris was torn. This is a good instance of Bennett's reticent realism.

Characteristically Bennett was chiefly attracted to the "market reports" and the lists of prices of foodstuffs supplied by *the Journal du Sikge* (pp. 144, 145, etc.). We remember that he gives us[1] the price at which Sophia buys potatoes and other articles. He rejoices in her honest "profiteering" and, to his heroine, the treaty of Versailles means chiefly that her two remaining hams are reduced "from about five pounds apiece to the usual price of hams".[2]

But, in spite of the frequency and accuracy with which such details are reproduced, how many picturesque incidents graphically presented by Sarcey are ignored and cast aside! The legend of Sergeant Hoff or the organization of patriotic clubs during the siege made no appeal to the pen which delighted in the rise of cheese and the fluctuations of the price of hams!

Only twice has Bennett deliberately borrowed from Sarcey facts which become actual incidents in his plot. One is unimportant and has reference to Sophia's mistaken arrest as a spy because she walked up and down her stairs at night with a candle *(O.W.T.,* III, vi 2; Sarcey, p. 93).

[1] *Old Wives' Tale*, III, Chap. VI, 2.
[2] Ib., ffl, Chap. VII, 3.

The second instance concerns a central incident of the novel: Chirac's spectacular departure in a balloon at the Gare du Nord. Next to the price of hams and potatoes, Bennett seems to have been interested most by those balloons. He probably studied the two pictures in which they are represented in Claretie's work, and he read in the same book a paragraph (p. 403) which supplies the information that out of the many balloons which left Paris only two were lost at sea. The first, *Le Jacquard,* carried "le marin Prince". There can be no doubt that it is the departure *of Le Jacquard* which Bennett meant to describe. But he went to Sarcey for more colour and emotion and paraphrased him with a closeness which is surprising in a page that certainly aims at attaining high literary excellence. Bennett expands and dilutes the passage, adding references to the two heroes of his tale: but he keeps close to the French text, preserving minute details which, one would have thought, were inventions of the novelist's imagination. The light of the railway engines, the colour of the taffetas, the presence of the Directeur des postes, the sailor, the mysterious figure wrapped in furs ("dont le nom est un mystere"—it probably *was* Chirac!), the pigeons, the forgotten victuals, the message from the governor, the perilous departure—all has been taken bodily from Sarcey. Only Sophia's half disdainful, half amused attitude and Chirac's theatrical courage remain the novelist's own creation.

Once again, the originality of Bennett is not questioned. It lies in the conception of these two lives which through sheer power of imagination and subtlety of technique are made to grow, divide, meet again, and decay before our very eyes. Without Auxerre, Paris, or even the draper's

shop the novel might still have been written, though it would have been a very different novel. What he left in the various sources which I have mentioned is just as remarkable as what he borrowed. And he was justified in making use of these elements: to fill the banks of his ambitious *roman-fleuvq* he had to feed it with many tributaries. The course and the main stream remain his own. But this study has probably not been in vain. It has at least made two points clear, two tendencies which are at the root of Bennett's technique: first, the minute preparation of his material, the patient collection of details so that it may be said that, in some of his descriptions at least, every sentence, almost every word, conceals a fact taken directly or indirectly from life:[1] the execution at Auxerre is thus made more realistic than the first-hand impressions of a sentimental journalist. Last, a tendency to select only some of those many facts, and those among the least vivid or apparently significant; a tendency to screen them, to introduce them unobtrusively, casually, to tone them down even and make them sometimes half-unintelligible, as in the case of the "notorious commerce in vegetables" during the siege, or the executioner's horrible words at Auxerre; but they remain in the reader's subconscious mind and have, no doubt, a considerable share in the cumulative effect of the whole.

Of such elements is the realism of Arnold Bennett made, with its faults and limitations, with its power of illusion, with its truthfulness, with its charm.

[1]The existence of these detailed French "sources" at the back of the main episodes of *The Old Wives' Tale* accounts to a certain extent for the French vocabulary or even constructions which, as some critics have noted, abound in the style *(enveloped, deposit, disarranged,* etc.).

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